

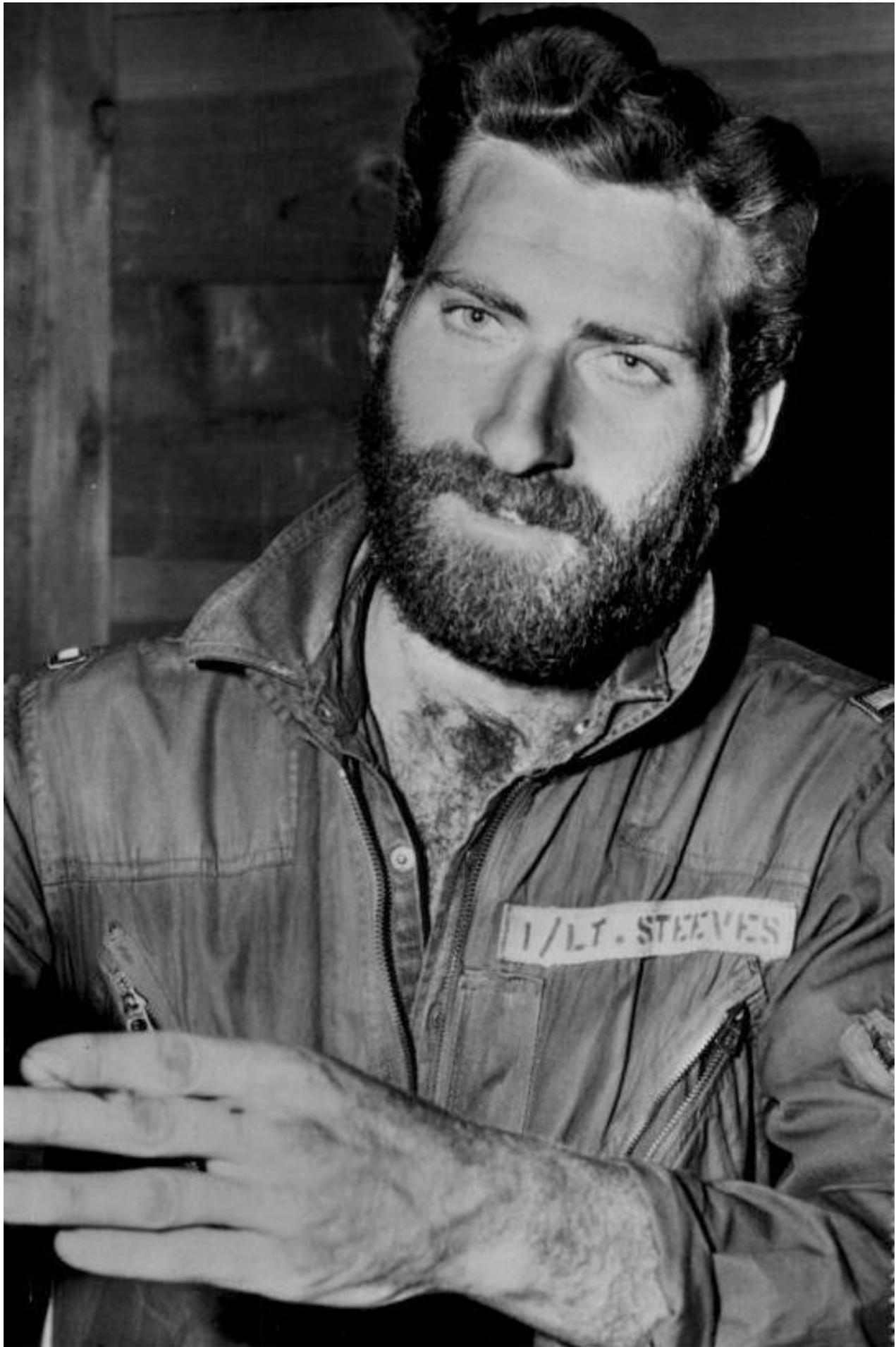
KINGS CANYON

Written by

Evan Parter and Paul Hilborn

**BASED ON A TRUE STORY**

FABRIK ENTERTAINMENT



**OVER BLACK**

STEEVES (V.O.)

At the end of it all, only your  
story survives.

**FADE IN ON**

A HAGGARD FACE;

Piercing eyes, patchy beard over hollow-cheeks. Only twenty-  
seven, but calloused, leathery skin reads a decade older.

STEEVES (V.O.)

People can believe or disbelieve  
mine as they choose.

**EXT. WOODS - NIGHT**

The MAN rides horseback through WHIPPING RAINFALL, bundled in  
a wool blanket, holding onto a RIDER as they GALLOP ahead.

STEEVES (V.O.)

If it is so miraculous they don't  
believe, then it is just that much  
better of a story.

The horse angles toward a REMOTE OUTPOST barely visible  
through the gusty downpour, mud flinging off its hooves.

STEEVES (V.O.)

You're the only one who deserves to  
know the truth.

**INT. CEDAR GROVE RANGER STATION - SIMULTANEOUS**

A Woody Guthrie album wobbles on a depression era phonograph.

Three Winchester Model 12 Rifles stand at attention in front  
of contour maps of the Sierra's most unforgiving terrain.

Coarse hands grip strong whiskey around a thousand year old  
sequoia stump doubling as a CARD TABLE.

The shortest of THREE RANGERS, let's call him SCRAPPY, takes  
a long drag of his Marlboro. Stamps his cig out on the stump.

SCRAPPY

Think it was the blast, caused the  
slide?

A SECOND RANGER studies his cards, chewing tobacco. Hair white as winter and face like a catcher's mitt. This is WISE.

WISE  
(sarcastic)  
Think Uncle Joe was a Red?

The THIRD RANGER smirks.

SALTY  
Knocked a pair of boulders off the face of Mount Whitney like they was a couple of marbles. From a hundred miles away, no less.

SCRAPPY  
(grinning wide)  
Feel good, don't it? Knowing the commies so much as lift a finger, Ike will blast 'em back Before Christ.

Wise eyes Scruppy. Notes his trembling hand.

WISE  
That pride moving through your fingers?

Scruppy's smile dissolves as Wise adds chips to his bet.

WISE (CONT'D)  
You got a tell as old as time.

A red merle BORDER COLLIE stirs by the fire. Its ears pull back, drawn to the front door. It growls, then BARKS.

The Rangers turn in the direction of the door moments before:

KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK.

SCRAPPY  
(spooked)  
...the hell is that?

WISE  
See any hikers out on patrol?

SCRAPPY  
Didn't see much of anything.

WISE  
Well, go on.

Scrappy moves with caution in his step. The Border Collie SNARLS by the fire-- FUR STANDING ON END.

Scrappy opens the door and a GUSH of wind blows SIDE-WAYS RAIN into the station past the silhouette of a MAN.

The man staggers in. 150 pounds soaking wet. And he is now, literally, soaking wet.

He sports a tattered FLIGHT SUIT, like it's an outer layer of loose skin. AIR FORCE INSIGNIA sewed on the breast pocket. Below, in red monogrammed letters, our hero's name:

LIEUTENANT DAVID STEEVES.

Steeves looks at the Rangers. Emotionless. Then, curious. As if he's genuinely unsure if they exist.

The Rider appears at the doorstep; horse tightly tied to a tree behind her. She helps Steeves into the ranger station.

RIDER

Come on then, give a hand.

Scrappy rushes to help.

RIDER (CONT'D)

Found him off trail up Granite  
Pass. Starved halfway to heaven.  
He's on the brink, fellas.

WISE

Christ, he's an airman? Set him  
down by the fire.

(to Scrappy)

Fetch a blanket. Some water. Quick.

The ghostly Steeves spots a ROTARY PHONE and wills himself across the room, bypassing the rangers and the surging fire.

WISE (CONT'D)

Whoa, son, where you going?

Steeves ignores him-- dragging himself towards the phone. He lifts the receiver. Bony fingers dial through throbbing pain.

RING... RING... RING.

The park rangers and the rider look on in shock as Steeves presses his ear to the phone. A WOMAN answers.

WOMAN (ON PHONE)

Hello?

Steeves tries to speak but is choked up by the sound of the woman BREATHING and a YOUNG GIRL FUSSING in the background.

Warm tears run down his cheeks, through his wild beard.

WOMAN (ON PHONE) (CONT'D)

Hello?

(long pause)

I'm going to hang up.

Steeves musters his last ounce of strength...

STEEVES

Do you still love me?

Silence on the other end. And then, a GASP of recognition.

WOMAN (ON PHONE)

...David?

STEEVES (ON PHONE)

It's me, Rita--

He's cut off by a CLICK.

The only sound in the station is the DEAD LINE in his hand.

**INT. LOBBY - CEDAR GROVE RANGER STATION - LATER**

Steeves sits at the table in front of the fire, draped in a blanket. A bowl of beef stew STEAMING before him. He stares in wonderment at the warm meal.

The RANGERS are seated around him, studying his every move. A MAP is spread out on the table on which they've plotted his trek through the Sierras.

WISE

How long?

STEEVES

What's the date?

WISE

April 1.

Steeves counts on his fingers.

STEEVES

Fifty-four days then.

The rangers share looks of awe.

SCRAPPY

Well that's a god damn miracle.

Steeves pats the pockets of his flight suit. He finds a smooth wooden tobacco pipe. Grips it in his hand.

STEEVES

Trouble any of you for a smoke?

Salty chuckles, smitten. He digs into his jeans.

SCRAPPY

Of all the things to hang onto.

Salty hands Steeves a pouch of tobacco and a matchbook. He gets to work packing his pipe, wholly focused on the task.

WISE

Rest up, Lieutenant. We'll phone the base in Merced.

Steeves nods his thanks. The rangers step away.

**INT. CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS**

SALTY

(whisper)

Is it even possible?

Wise glances out the window into the cruel wilderness. Shakes his head in astonishment.

WISE

Three decades on the job... never seen nothing like it.

SCRAPPY

That's how miracles tend to work.

(to Salty)

Still got the number of the County Times?

SALTY

Well, sure.

WISE

Military should know before the press.

SCRAPPY

C'mon, Gene. Donations been real light this year.

WISE/GENE

What's that got to do with--

SCRAPPY

Guy like that with a story like this... slaps a picture of Cedar Grove on the front cover of every paper in a hundred miles.

SALTY

(buzzing)

At the least.

SCRAPPY

Could drum up interest in the Parks.

Gene ruminates. Sighs.

GENE

We'll give him the night.

Salty grins, patting Gene on the back en route to the phone.

SCRAPPY

What luck, huh?

**INT. LOBBY - CONTINUOUS**

TIGHT ON Steeves as he pulls in a deep breath of smoke, staring at the beef stew steaming idly on the card table. Darker now that he is alone; a whole world of thought just beyond his wooden gaze.

CUT TO:

**INT. SUPPLY SHED - SIERRAS - DAWN - FLASHBACK**

*An empty BEAN CAN hits the wood floor, TUMBLES.*

*Steeves packs his few belongings into a GUNNY SACK.*

*He studies a map of Kings Canyon. The closest Ranger Station is in Cedar Grove, on the back side of a 12 thousand foot peak. A suicide mission by the looks of it.*

*His eyes scan the stark shed: empty food containers; ravaged shelves; gaping hole in the roof.*

*A FOREST FIRE rages outside, casting an eerie apocalyptic GLOW through the window.*

*Steeves folds the map, slides it into the sack.*

*He takes one last look around and hurries out, passing a crude map carved into the wood wall. The route of his death march traced through the Sierras, ending in "Cedar Grove."*

*And beneath that: "Sorry about the mess-- Lt. David Steeves."*

**EXT. WOODS - LATER**

*Steeves sports a BANDANA made from a strip of parachute. Weary eyes visible behind cracked Aviators.*

*He consults the map, navigating his way through the woods.*

**EXT. RIVER - DAY**

*Steeves stands before a surging river, mountains vaulting beyond. He strips down. Shoves his flight suit into the knapsack and ties his boots around the stalk of his neck.*

*Covered head to toe in bug bites, scratches, and scars, he leaps onto a boulder, staying above the gushing torrent.*

*He jumps again. Lands on a mossy surface, and falls sideways into the sweeping current.*

*Steeves surfaces several yards down the river, rushing headlong towards a WATERFALL.*

*He spots the steep drop thirty yards away, and attacks the water, swimming with abandon towards the opposite bank.*

*But the current is too strong. It tosses him over the fall.*

*He disappears into the frothy maelstrom below... SURFACES on the edge of the whirlpool; flailing to stay afloat; pummeled with ice water from above; choking on the thick mist.*

*He floats out from under the fall. Grabs on to a fallen tree and drags his shivering body onto dry land. Skin the color of bleach. Ribs so pronounced you could strum a tune on them.*

*He lies face first in the mud, tears threatening. Then SLAPS himself across the face. No time for self-pity.*

*Everything he owns is soaking wet, including his map of the Sierras-- now disintegrating in his hands.*

**EXT. PEAK - DUSK**

Steeves scales a sheer CLIFF. He climbs hand over hand, attempting the vertical route-- impossible with his withering strength. A dead end.

He coughs into a fit, and drops back down. Stuck.

Crawling over to the ledge where he came, he stretches out on his stomach and pulls a PHOTOGRAPH from his breast pocket.

A black and white picture of a BLONDE WOMAN-- a sober, mid-western version of Marilyn Monroe-- and a YOUNG GIRL in her arms, staring back with a thin smile. Pure innocence.

He stares into their eyes. Then closes his. Suddenly, his muscles ease. At peace with his final decision.

He inches forward... One more foot and his center of gravity will send him tumbling to his death. But then--

A shower of SMALL ROCKS pelt Steeves from above.

His eyes shoot open as he turns toward the peak.

Over the ledge, the head of a BLACK HORSE peers down at him.

Steeves tries to blink away the hallucination as the horse's RIDER leans over the ledge, spotting him.

She shades her eyes to get a better look.

RIDER

Jesus, Mary, Joseph...

**EXT. WOODS - NIGHT**

Steeves rides horseback through WHIPPING RAINFALL, bundled in a wool blanket, holding onto the RIDER as they GALLOP ahead.

TRANSITION TO:

**EXT. CEDAR GROVE RANGER STATION - MORNING - PRESENT**

Dawn bruises the sky over the rustic ranger station.

A dated CHRYSLER stutters into the parking lot. A REPORTER hops out, tucking a wrinkled shirt into worn trousers.

As he hustles over to the door, two other SEDANS chug up the mountain road behind him.

**INT. CORRIDOR - CEDAR GROVE RANGER STATION**

Steeves sits rigidly in a chair across from the rotary phone, staring at the receiver. Hands clenched, marble eyes. Unclear if he's slept, let alone moved, in hours.

Scrappy, now in tan slacks and an ironed dress shirt, enters from the other end of the corridor with the REPORTER in tow.

SCRAPPY

There he is...

(shouting)

Hey, Dave. I'd like to introduce you to somebody.

Steeves blinks out of his daze. He limps to his feet, and shakes the reporter's hand, mirroring his eager smile.

REPORTER

It's a right fine honor to meet you, Lieutenant. I'm with the County Times.

STEEVES

Hello.

REPORTER

Heard about all you did out there. Modern day Odyssey if you ask me. Braving the elements, fending off wild beasts-- all in the name of returning home to your family.

Steeves studies the hyperbolic reporter, wary, as the man slides pen and pad out of his back pocket.

REPORTER (CONT'D)

Mind if I ask a couple questions?

Steeves runs his fingertips through his beard.

CUT TO:

MULTIPLE REPORTERS descend on Steeves.

REPORTER #1

What happened in the air?

STEEVES

Engine blew. Knocked me out cold. Woke up in a cockpit full of smoke. So I ejected.

REPORTER #2  
 First 15 days, all without food--  
 how's that humanly possible?

A long pause.

STEEVES  
 Just is.

REPORTER #3  
 Any lucky ladies out there waiting  
 for you?

The reporters stick recording devices in his face and  
 SCRIBBLE furiously on their pads as they CROWD ever closer.

STEEVES  
 My wife, Rita. We have a little  
 girl. Leisa's her name.  
 (overwhelmed)  
 Excuse me a minute.

Nauseous and short of breath, Steeves limps into a bathroom.

**INT. BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Steeves VOMITS into the rusty sink.

He looks up, catching his reflection in the mirror. It nearly  
 brings him to his knees. A stranger stares back-- jarring  
 enough to make him look down to escape it.

Slowly, Steeves looks back up at the reflection. The initial  
 shock subsides, and suddenly, he's LAUGHING.

A LOUD GUTTURAL FIT from a primal place deep within. His eyes  
 water, but the roaring laughter continues. The raw human  
 response of a man who beat death; a survivor celebrating the  
 life he still has left to live.

**EXT. CEDAR GROVE RANGER STATION - LATER**

A DRIVER from the closest Air Force Base arrives and ushers  
 Steeves past the throng of REPORTERS into an idling SEDAN.

The Park Rangers stand by the entrance of the station.

Above the treeline, a SPIRE OF BLACK SMOKE catches Gene's  
 attention. He squints, considering the strange sight.

**INT. USAF VEHICLE - MOMENTS LATER**

Steeves stares out at the passing wilderness. He spots the rising smoke, and abruptly turns away.

STEEVES

Are we heading to the airport?

DRIVER

Base in Merced, for now. Sure you'll be getting home soon enough.

Steeves hears his name, but it's not coming from the driver.

LOCAL RADIO HOST

*Lieutenant David Steeves, an Air Force pilot previously declared dead from a plane crash, stumbled into Cedar Grove Ranger Station in Kings Canyon National Park late last night...*

The driver turns up the volume.

LOCAL RADIO HOST (CONT'D)

*A true miracle given the harsh conditions in the Sierras remote wilderness.*

DRIVER

Don't waste any time, do they?

Steeves listens intently to the radio as we try to decipher whether he's captivated or concerned with the publicity.

**INT. CASTLE AIR FORCE BASE - MERCED, CA - MORNING**

PATRICK MCGINNIS, an ambitious young Public Affairs Officer, fields the most important call of his life.

MCGINNIS (ON PHONE)

As many outlets as we can accommodate, Sir. This is a golden opportunity to celebrate the world-class training that enabled the Lieutenant's survival.

A BASE COMMANDER sits nearby, on the edge of his seat. Others sneak glances through the door; word of Steeves has spread.

MCGINNIS (ON PHONE) (CONT'D)

Glad to have your support on this, General.

(MORE)

MCGINNIS (ON PHONE) (CONT'D)  
 I'm confident the Lieutenant will  
 give a good show.  
 (pause)  
 Roger that. Wheels in motion.

McGinnis sets the phone down on the receiver with a smile.

MCGINNIS (CONT'D)  
 Pentagon approved a press  
 conference for 1100 hours.

CASTLE BASE COMMANDER  
 How in the hell we going to manage  
 that, McGinnis?

Outside the window, the USAF vehicle pushes through a cluster  
 of reporters camped outside the guard station.

MCGINNIS  
 Come have a look. He's already  
 filled out our bleachers.

The Base Commander cranes his neck, tracking the vehicle as  
 it drives by their window-- Steeves gazing out at him.

CASTLE BASE COMMANDER  
 Sure hope you're choosing the right  
 horse; I've never heard of the guy.

MCGINNIS  
 It doesn't much matter who he is,  
 only what he's done. All we do now  
 is repeat the story, over and over,  
 'til a legend is born.

**EXT. CASTLE AIR FORCE BASE - MOMENTS LATER**

Steeves exits the sedan in a swirling cloud of dust. He  
 glances up at the looming air traffic control tower. Spots  
 the FACES gawking at him through various windows.

He shuts the door, revealing a slab of granite with an  
 engraving: CASTLE AIR FORCE BASE/ GLOBAL POWER THRU AIRPOWER.

DRIVER  
 Right this way, Lieutenant.

**INT. BARRACKS - CASTLE AIR BASE**

Steeves trails the Driver down a long, bare-walled corridor.

Several AIR FORCE PERSONNEL step aside, heads turning as they track Steeves' ghostly procession-- no one saying a word.

**INT. CASTLE AIR FORCE BASE - LATER**

A FLIGHT SURGEON helps Steeves out of his soiled uniform.

He's covered in pockmarks, bruises; protruding ribs, and caved shoulders. The flight suit was another skin for so long; without it, he's a living skeleton.

Steeves crosses his arms; not proud of his appearance. The surgeon gives him a thorough examination.

FLIGHT SURGEON

That's it?

STEEVES

How do you mean?

FLIGHT SURGEON

I get a call this morning that some flier ejects over the High Sierras, hoofing it for months over rock and ice in 10 below... I brought a bone cutter, Lieutenant.

The surgeon laughs, applying a stethoscope to Steeves chest.

FLIGHT SURGEON (CONT'D)

You're in remarkably good shape, all things considered.

He withdraws the stethoscope, bewildered.

FLIGHT SURGEON (CONT'D)

Christ, you're gonna send me back to church.

Steeves stares ahead blankly.

**INT. OFFICE - CASTLE AIR FORCE BASE - MORNING**

Steeves stands with the Base Commander pointing out his trek through the Sierras. Officer McGinnis leans against the wall.

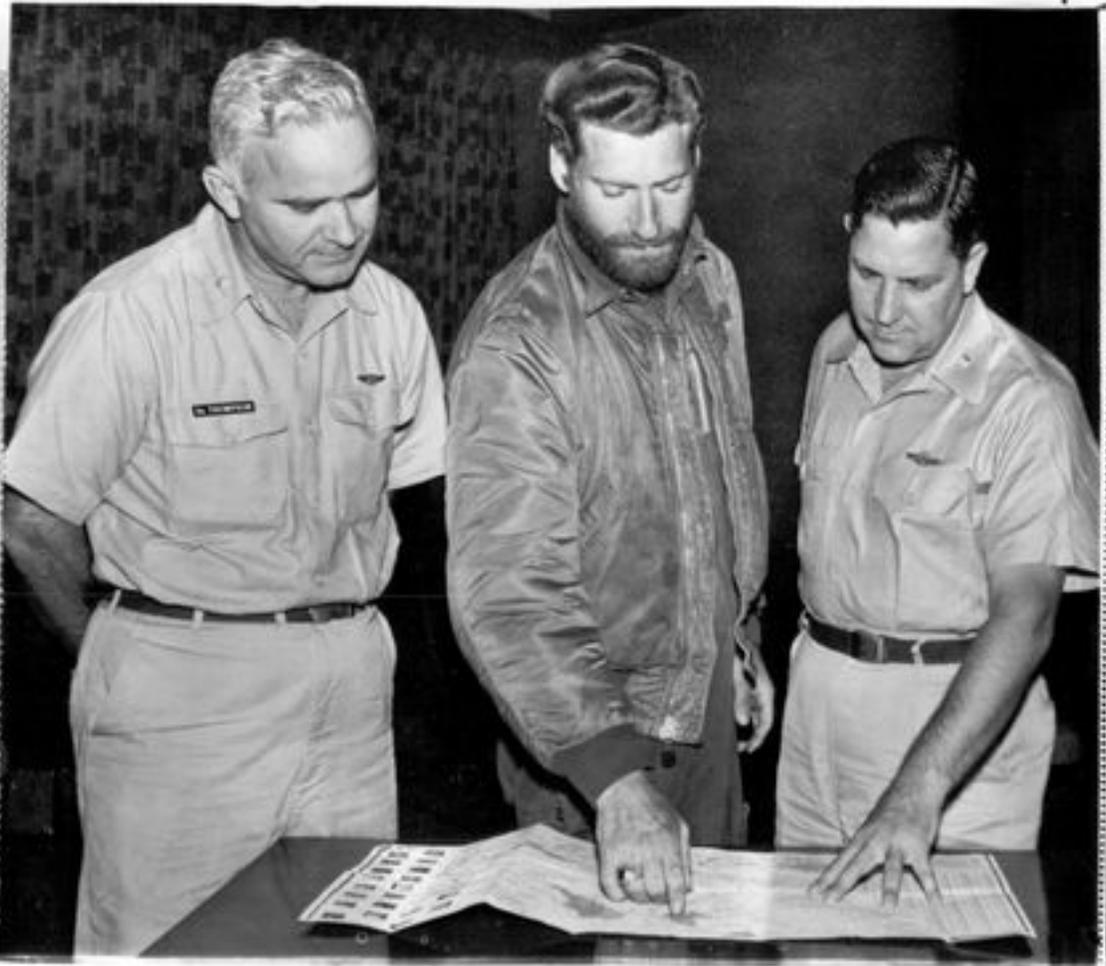
CASTLE BASE COMMANDER

Medic says you're hanging in there.

STEEVES

Yes, Sir.

(FR3)MERCED, Calif., July 2--RETRACING ADVENTURE--Air Force Lt. David Steeves (e) shows Major William Thompson (l) and Lt. Col. Richard White (r) where he parachuted into High Sierra wilderness May 9. Steeves was in good condition following 54-day ordeal. (AP WIREPHOTO) (hwj31342-hs) 1957



CASTLE BASE COMMANDER  
Should be proud of all you've done.

STEEVES  
Will I be getting home soon, Sir?

McGinnis steps forward.

MCGINNIS  
Yes, very soon, Lieutenant.  
(extends his hand)  
Office McGinnis, Public Affairs.  
We'd like you to participate in a  
brief press conference first, if  
that's alright with you.

STEEVES  
Who's going to be there?

MCGINNIS  
Just a couple folks who want to  
hear about your survival.

CASTLE BASE COMMANDER  
We do need you to be light on the  
technical details of the jet. This  
will be a national broadcast; can't  
be sure who's listening in.

MCGINNIS  
Walk in the park compared to all  
you've been through.

Steeves sniffs. Scratches his beard.

STEEVES  
So, then I'm reinstated?

McGinnis pats him on the back.

MCGINNIS  
Welcome home, Lieutenant.

Steeves looks down at his filthy, mud-caked suit.

STEEVES  
Should I change first?

MCGINNIS  
I'd consider keeping the flight  
suit on. And the beard.

Off Steeves' curious look--

MCGINNIS (CONT'D)  
 Picture's worth a thousand words.  
 (beat)  
 Besides, ladies really swoon for a  
 wild man.

McGinnis winks. Steeves forces a smile.

**INT. SHOWER - LATER**

Warm water steams off Steeves' rigid body. He watches layers of filth run down like a muddy stream, clumping in the drain.

He takes a razor to his beard, but stops short.

**INT. CORRIDOR - LATER**

Steeves follows McGinnis down the corridor toward the makeshift press room. His flight suit hangs off his skeletal frame. They stop outside the double doors.

MCGINNIS  
 Take your time. Have fun with it.

Steeves glances between a thin crack in the doors. The room BUZZES with anticipation. He itches his beard. Struck by the pomp and circumstance.

STEEVES  
 Should I start at Oakland?

MCGINNIS  
 Tell them what you told me, exactly how you told it. We don't need Gene Kelly out there. They came to see *Lieutenant David Steeves*. The man who stared death in the eye, and didn't blink.

McGinnis pats Steeves on the shoulder to loosen him up.

MCGINNIS (CONT'D)  
 Goddamn that beard's a wonder.

**INT. CONFERENCE HALL - CASTLE AIR FORCE BASE - CONTINUOUS**

CAMERA FLASHES berate Steeves as he pushes through the double doors. He squints and shields his eyes-- then remembers to smile as he strides to the podium.

Dozens of JOURNALISTS, PHOTOGRAPHERS and AIR FORCE PERSONNEL, jostle for position at the front of the stage.

MCGINNIS

Good morning. On April 1st at eighteen hundred hours, First Lieutenant David Steeves did the impossible. After fifty-four days spent fighting for his life in the High Sierras, he emerged from the wild, alive and well. His story is a testament to the bravery, courage and ingenuity of American soldiers in active service today. It is with great pleasure that I introduce, a true American hero... Lieutenant David Steeves.

THICK APPLAUSE. Steeves approaches the microphone.

A CAMERAMAN stands behind a Marconi MK II mounted on a tripod in back. He flicks a switch. It blinks red.

Steeves takes a breath, about to speak...

CUT TO:

**EXT. SHED - SIMPSON MEADOW CAMPING GROUNDS - MORNING**

A BATTERED DEER hangs from its hind legs.

An emaciated Steeves tugs on a rope, raising the deer higher. He's rigged a clever pulley hoist from spare parts.

He approaches the bloodied carcass with a KNIFE.

**EXT. SHED - LATER**

A metal TOOLBOX smokes atop the steel grate of the fireplace-- a makeshift oven, slow-cooking the deer meat inside.

Resting on his haunches, shoulders caving in, Steeves glances across the camping grounds to the thick grove of trees.

He spots a LONE COYOTE sitting near the river, watching him. After a moment, as if sensing trouble, it scurries off.

**INT. SHED - ANOTHER DAY**

Steeves mouth is open wide like the dead, deep in sleep. Rain patters softly against the rooftop.

A subtle rumble just before-- the entire shed is grabbed by a SEISMIC QUAKE.

Steeves knocks down to his knees.

He reaches both hands up just in time to stop a STORAGE SHELF from crushing him, everything on the shelves, sliding off, BREAKING over his body and onto the floor.

A CACOPHONY OF SOUND that seems to never end...

Until, abruptly, the quake is over. And silence returns.

Steeves pushes the empty shelf back upright. Water drips onto his head from a massive FRACTURE in the ceiling.

Fuck.

**INT. SHED - ANOTHER DAY**

Rain POUNDS the roof of the shed, streaming inside.

Steeves opens his toolbox for a meal only to find a few remaining portions of the deer, wrapped in tin foil.

He shuts it, rationing-- but the longer he looks, the more he loses himself to hunger.

Suddenly, he FLIPS the box over and grabs the largest portion of venison. He hesitates-- then devours the meat.

**INT. SHED - ANOTHER DAY**

Steeves shakes out the last grains of salt into his palm, tossing the container near the emptied toolbox.

The shed has been ravaged. Drawers pulled out, wrappers licked clean, glass containers shattered. Paradise lost.

Steeves licks the last of the salt off his palm. His savage beard extends well beyond his chin.

Through the window, smeared with oil and breath, the snow is melting-- first signs of spring peeking through.

**EXT. GROVE - DAY**

A SHAKY FLAME lifts to a hollow section of a tree, packed full of mattress padding and tiny sticks.

*Steeves patiently waits for the flame to JUMP from the match to the kindling. The FIRE SPREADS in an instant. Smoke billowing into a clear blue sky.*

**EXT. SHED - DUSK**

*PLUMES OF BLACK SMOKE rise above the treeline.*

*Steeves sits against the shed, watching the forest burn-- the blaze threatening to jump the river and enter his campground.*

*He spits. Scratches his beard. Weighing the odds.*

**INT. SHED - DAWN**

*An empty BEAN CAN hits the wood floor, TUMBLES.*

*Steeves packs his few belongings into a GUNNY SACK. A FOREST FIRE rages outside, casting an eerie GLOW through the window.*

TRANSITION TO:

**INT. KITCHEN - CONDO - WASHINGTON, DC - MORNING - PRESENT**

CLAY BLAIR JR (32) bites down on a piece of butterless toast.

Pugnacious and pedantic, Blair has a tough time making friends-- driven to a fault; a reporter intensely committed to the pursuit of absolute truth in uncertain times.

He wears a starched white collared shirt, black tie. His hawk eyes shift quickly, poring over the Daily News.

AGNES (30), his wife, sips coffee, deeply engrossed in an article on nuclear proliferation. She drops the World section like it weighs a metric ton. Rubs her bleary eyes.

AGNES

Dreamt last night the bomb went off.

BLAIR

Huh.

AGNES

We tried to hide in a cellar, but there was a family already inside.

Blair stays quiet, keeps reading.

AGNES (CONT'D)

A little boy-- not much older than Kemp. We forced him and his family out. He cried the whole time.

Blair snorts. He glances up to find his wife glowering.

BLAIR

Sorry, hun. This clown of a columnist, misspelled 'erudite.'

Blair stands, folding his paper. He kisses his wife on the top of the head, altogether missing her sullen expression.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

What were you saying?

He tucks an old leather bound notebook into his briefcase, turns to leave.

AGNES

Big day ahead.

BLAIR

If you say so.

Blair walks out of the kitchen as Agnes clears the table.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS**

Blair steps over his son, KEMP, 8, who lies on his belly in front of a cabinet television, Davy Crocket cap on his head.

Blair drops the paper in front of Kemp.

BLAIR

Give your brain a chance.

Blair glances at the television as he passes. Double-takes.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

What's this?

Kemp shrugs. Blair turns on the volume. Steeves is on the screen, speaking live at Castle Air Base.

STEEVES (ON SCREEN)

... climbed to the top of the pass 'til I, uh, couldn't push on any further. That's where she found me-- a rider breaking trail. First time I'd seen anybody in, well, fifty-four days, I suppose.

Blair watches with mounting interest.

**INT. CONFERENCE HALL - CASTLE AIR FORCE BASE - SIMULTANEOUS**

Steeves at the podium, sweating under the lights.

STEEVES

She rode me to the station, and the rangers took over from there.

The PRESS look on like cows at pasture. Steeves shoots a quick look to McGinnis behind him-- he's done.

MCGINNIS

Questions?

Hands shoot up; reporters yell over each other.

Steeves stands an inch taller, the smallest hint of a smile growing on his face.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - TOWN HOME - SIMULTANEOUS**

Blair stares at the spectacle on screen, already writing the story in his head.

**INT. OFFICE - SATURDAY EVENING POST - MORNING**

Blair sits at a desk in a compact office, sleeves rolled up. He's on a call. Scribbling notes as he talks.

BLAIR

Where is he heading now?

REPORTERS and EDITORS funnel through the hallway, casting sidelong glances at Blair as they pass his office.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

I appreciate the transparency, Officer. You'll hear from me.

Blair drops the call, and springs to his feet-- hustling off in the direction of the other journalists.

**INT. CONFERENCE ROOM, SATURDAY EVENING POST - MOMENTS LATER**

STAFF crowd around a conference table, an all-hands meeting.

Oversized Norman Rockwell magazine covers adorn the walls. Pastoral images of the American Dream.

Blair steps into the room, leans against the door frame.

The Managing Editor, BEN HIBBS, 50s, owl glasses, boyish features, presides.

BEN

When it's costing thirty cents to produce a magazine sold for fifteen, something must be done.

Ben meets eyes with each member of his staff.

BEN (CONT'D)

We're shrinking the size of our magazine by an inch and a half. Nothing else changes, understood?

DENNIS, late 40s, a grim editor in a bow-tie, interrupts.

DENNIS

Should we be worried, Ben?

Ben attempts to reassure the anxious reporters.

BEN

I said, nothing else changes.

DENNIS

If we're shrinking that means advertising revenue's pinched, so our readership's down. And taking that to its inevitable end-- Curtis Publishing's the one moving your lips. I know what's going on here; all of us do.

BEN

Alright, you want it like it is. The Saturday Evening Post has yet to find a way to compete with an electronic box that lights up and talks to our readers. And yes, Curtis has started to take notice.

The room goes quiet.

BLAIR

Why compete? Television goes one way, we should head the other.

All eyes shift to Blair.

DENNIS

Who's this guy, Ben? And what does he mean by 'we?'

BEN

Clay Blair Jr. Former Life and Time correspondent. We're lucky to have him.

DENNIS

The ship's sinking, so we add more weight? That fits.

BEN

Blair, continue.

BLAIR

Long-form exclusives with influential public figures. Our answer to the celebrity interviews on every major broadcast network.

Dennis scoffs.

DENNIS

Long-form? Generally speaking, when something shrinks, pal-- it gets smaller.

BLAIR

So, lose the fluff.

BEN

Mr. Blair, this is Dennis Haskins. Humor and Poetry editor.

Clearly what Blair meant by 'fluff.' Tension in the room pulled taut as the reporters wait to see if he'll back down.

BLAIR

What's the alternative-- more gossip columns and Khrushchev cartoons? If the focus is on entertainment alone, we will consistently lose out to moving pictures.

The insult lands hard; Dennis stews.

DENNIS

Two minutes in and you already know more than everybody in the room.

BLAIR  
What should that tell you?

DENNIS  
Tells me you're a snot nose prick.

BEN  
Dial it back, boys.

BLAIR  
Ben, you hired me, in your words,  
to 'bring legitimacy back to The  
Post.'

Ben leans back in his chair, outed before his colleagues.

BLAIR (CONT'D)  
Taking the moral high ground and  
increasing readership does not have  
to be mutually exclusive.

Silence hovers. Furtive glances. Dennis rises to his feet.

DENNIS  
Cute speech. I'm all tingly inside.

He crosses the room, staring daggers at Blair on his way out.

Ben rolls his pen from one hand to the other, considering.

BEN  
Who exactly did you have in mind?

BLAIR  
Well, a dead Air Force pilot just  
came back to life.

**EXT. TARMAC - MITCHEL AIR FORCE BASE, LONG ISLAND, NY - DAY**

A SECURITY OFFICER motions for a '56 Chevrolet One-Fifty to roll forward a couple feet. Makes a fist, signaling to stop.

The Chevy brakes, then the doors on the cherry red sedan open wide. HAROLD and ELSIE STEEVES (50s), David's parents, exit the car dressed in their Sunday best.

HAROLD JR "Harry", 28, Steeves' brother, and his wife RITA, 24, step out of the back seat. Rita holds LEISA, 5, adorable in a pink sundress.

Rita stands stiff. She clasps the fake pearls on her wrist, staring at the PRESS as they mass around Elsie and Harold.

LEISA

What are all these people doing here, Momma?

RITA

They're here to see your father, just like us, sweetheart.

Leisa gawks at the crowd as Harry comes to their side.

HARRY

Feels like a dream, doesn't it?

RITA

I'm not convinced it isn't.

**INT. AIR FORCE TRANSPORT JET, CRUISING ALTITUDE - DAY**

Steeves sits next to a sleeping McGinnis. A newspaper in his lap with Steeves' face on the cover below the headline:

"SIERRA SURVIVOR HEADING HOME."

Beneath that, a photo of Rita with the caption "PILOT'S WIFE INCOHERENT WITH JOY."

Steeves carefully extracts the newspaper, considering the caption, when all the sudden--

TURBULENCE rocks the plane. McGinnis jolts awake and grabs hold of Steeves' arm. Steeves doesn't flinch.

After a moment, the plane levels and calm returns to the cabin. McGinnis draws his hand back. Steeves' smile gives way to a good natured laugh.

**EXT. TARMAC - MITCHEL AIR FORCE BASE - DAY**

McGinnis disembarks down a rolling stair ladder, giddy at the sight of REPORTERS held behind a rope.

Rita holds Leisa near the front of the press. ELSIE squeezes Rita's shoulder.

ELSIE

He should see you two first.

Rita steps out front; nervous to be the center of attention.

Steeves emerges from the plane and scans the crowd. He spots his family and hurries down the steps.

Rita's hand instinctively covers her mouth, forgetting about the cameras, wholly moved by the sight of her husband alive.

Leisa squirms with excitement in her mother's arms. Rita lets her down. She races under the rope, toward her father.

LEISA  
DADDY!!!

Steeves lifts her into his arms, holds her tight.

LEISA (CONT'D)  
(whispering)  
Mommy said you weren't coming back.

STEEVES  
(welling up)  
I'm here, baby. I'll never leave  
you again.

Steeves sets Leisa down as Rita approaches. She throws her arms around him, and they hold each other close.

Rita tries to catch her breath while Steeves is blinded by the disorienting array of FLASHING cameras.

They move apart, staring at each other like puzzle pieces.

CAMERAMAN  
Let's see a kiss, huh.

Rita shocks back to reality.

RITA  
I don't know where to... with this  
dreadful beard.

The press laugh for a moment, but Rita's hesitation draws out too long for comfort.

Clocking the adverse attention, Rita abruptly grabs hold of Steeves and pulls him in for a kiss. They lock lips while cameras snap away.

ELSIE (O.S.)  
My baby.

Elsie tugs at Steeves' arm. He turns and hugs his mother.

Rita steps away as David's father and brother pull him in for a bear hug; laughing and crying all the while.

Steeves loses Rita and Leisa to the crowd, as the press mob around him-- bulbs FLASHING; CHEERING him on.

McGinnis stands to the side, smile wide as the Pacific.

**EXT. BACKYARD - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - FAIRFIELD, CT - DAY**

A POP of champagne.

ALBERT "AL" GILMORE (24), Steeves' best friend and fellow Air Force pilot, lets the fizz drip on the lawn of the modest one story home, surrounded by a BBQ in full swing.

AL  
(loud)  
Please, everybody, raise a glass.

Steeves' family and friends are happy to oblige. We notice MCGINNIS and BLAIR among them.

Al hands the champagne to Steeves.

STEEVES  
No, thanks. I'm a lightweight now.

AL  
What's this, you came back a prude?  
(shouting)  
To the wild man!

They all raise a glass as Steeves raises the bottle, demure.

**INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS**

Rita and her mother ESTHER, 50s, Swedish-American, arrange hors d'oeuvre on a platter in the quaint kitchen.

Rita stares out the window at her husband, champagne in hand.

ESTHER  
You look ill.

RITA  
It's as if nothing happened before.

Rita covers her face with a shaky hand.

ESTHER  
No one knows what you do.

Esther takes Rita's hand in hers. They meet eyes.

ESTHER (CONT'D)  
Play along, Rita. This won't last.

**EXT. BACKYARD - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - FAIRFIELD, CT - DAY**

Glasses clink around him as Steeves looks at the bottle fondly, then sets it down without taking a sip.

He scans the yard for Rita as McGinnis approaches.

MCGINNIS

Lieutenant. I'd like you to meet somebody. This is Clay Blair Jr of the Saturday Evening Post. Esteemed journalist, and a good friend of the Air Force.

STEEVES

Pleasure to meet you.

The men shake firmly.

BLAIR

You belong to the 3851st, do I have that right?

STEEVES

Yes, sir.

BLAIR

Good boys down there.

STEEVES

You're a vet?

BLAIR

These days, who isn't.

MCGINNIS

Clay's being modest. Fought with the 8th over Berlin.

STEEVES

We should be toasting you, Mr. Blair. You're the real hero.

BLAIR

To be honest, Lieutenant, I've never been much interested in hero worship. In my experience, the man is invariably more interesting than the hero.

Steeves nods, agreeing with Blair's ideology.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

Listen, I don't want to take any more time away from your family, so I'll cut right to it-- the Post would like to make an offer for the exclusive rights to your story.

Steeves turns to McGinnis, unsure of the offer.

STEEVES

I've already told my story.

BLAIR

What I'd like to do is get the full account. Every last detail of your survival; reintegration into society; achievements at the Air Force. All in your own words.

Steeves ponders Blair's pitch. Blair doubles down.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

The American people could use a role model. A man of integrity. What you did out there-- it wasn't some miracle. It was resourcefulness. Resilience. Bravery. Strength. And above all... character. That's the kind of man I want my boy looking up to.

Steeves is swept up in Blair's passion.

MCGINNIS

The decision of who tells your story is entirely yours, Lieutenant. But I promise you, this man will tell it right.

Blair hands over his card with the Saturday Evening Post logo emblazoned on thick white stock.

BLAIR

Think on it. My number's on the card. And if you turn it over, you'll see the Post understands the value of a story like yours.

Blair pats him on the back, and walks toward the gate.

Steeves turns the card over-- "\$8,000" reflecting off his wide eyes. After a beat, he hurries off towards Blair and catches him at the gate.

STEEVES

I'm in.

Blair smiles, curiously. Steeves notices.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

It's not about the money. It'll certainly help get us back on our feet-- but I trust you. You're an airman.

Blair nods. Gives a slight salute.

BLAIR

I'll be in touch. Enjoy the celebration. You earned it.

Off Steeves, turning the card over in his hand.

**INT. BASEMENT - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - NIGHT**

Rita unpacks a suitcase, laying clothes on the pull-out bed. All the furniture here needs to be refurbished, or tossed.

RITA

Those are for you. They're your brother's but should still fit.

STEEVES

Thank you.

Steeves struggles to disrobe through sore muscles.

RITA

Here.

Rita takes off his coat, then his shirt, seeing his weathered body for the first time-- countless pockmarks and bruises.

Rita guides the white undershirt over Steeves's shoulders. He swims in the fabric.

RITA (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. With the move, it just didn't seem right to fold up your clothes, unpack them someplace else.

STEEVES

This is fine.

RITA

(avoiding eye contact)

We were in Selma for as long as we could manage, waiting for them to find you. But I needed to find work, you see, so I had to leave the base and move Leisa in with my mother, start towards a degree--

STEEVES

Rita.

Steeves gently takes Rita's face in his hand.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

This family is what kept me alive. I don't need a single thing more than this.

After a beat, she wraps her arms around his emaciated body. They hold each other for a moment before Rita lets go.

RITA

(abruptly)

I should go wash up.

As Rita turns to walk away--

STEEVES

It's over. We ended it in Oakland. I haven't spoken to her since.

(beat)

Everything about me has changed, Rita. I promise you.

Rita nods before closing herself inside the bathroom.

Steeves stands there, listening to his wife turn on the faucet to hide the sound of her crying; powerless to help.

**INT. BEDROOM - CONDO - WASHINGTON, DC - NIGHT**

Blair folds a pair of slacks into a suitcase, cigarette smoking on his lips. A radio reports the nightly news.

NEWS ANCHOR (O.S.)

*Amateur radio hobbyists are flocking to their receivers this evening to hear the first ever artificial satellite as it hurtles above the Eastern United States. Engineered in secret by the USSR...*

AGNES  
Will you be gone for long?

Agnes stands in the doorway.

BLAIR  
Can't imagine so.

AGNES  
What's the story?

BLAIR  
That airman who survived in the  
Sierras.

AGNES  
Oh. Kemp will be excited to hear.  
He's been on and on about him.

NEWS ANCHOR (O.S.)  
*Students of Columbia University  
recorded the sound...*

Agnes lingers.

AGNES  
Will you be sure to call tonight?

Blair looks up from his suitcase.

AGNES (CONT'D)  
They've been practicing the 'Duck  
and Cover' drill in Kemp's class.  
He's been restless at night.

Blair returns to packing.

BLAIR  
Sure, hun.

NEWS ANCHOR (O.S.)  
*...we're going to play the  
recording live for you now.*  
(pause)  
*Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep...*

Agnes starts to leave, then pauses. She listens to Sputnik  
along with Blair, their backs turned to each other.

CUT TO:

**INT. SHED - DAWN**

Steeves wakes to the sound of CRUNCHING LEAVES outside.

FOOTSTEPS, approaching the shed...

He blinks rapidly, ears to the door. He briskly rolls out of bed and clambers over to the door, throwing it open to find:

A DEER licking at a bean can.

Steeves freezes in wonderment at the sight.

His stomach begs, snapping him back. He dashes for the revolver, tripping over his makeshift bed.

When he returns to the open door, the deer is gone.

**EXT. SIMPSON MEADOW - DAY**

A salt lick lays at the foot of a pine tree, tucked between a narrow opening of branches.

Above the salt lick, a COCKED REVOLVER, poised to fire. Clear fishing line tied to its trigger is spread across the opening on a system of weights, acting as a trip wire.

Steeves pulls softly on the fishing line. It applies pressure on the trigger, and a shot BLASTS into the earth.

Steeves bends down to examine the ground where the bullet entered-- inches above an 'X' etched in the dirt.

An ingenious trap made to kill a deer.

**INT. SHED - NIGHT**

Steeves tosses and turns in his bed, reeling from a fever-induced nightmare.

A GUN SHOT echoes off the mountainside.

He rises bolt upright. WIDE-EYED. Sweat peppering his forehead. He throws off the canvas and reaches for his boots.

**EXT. SIMPSON MEADOW - MOMENTS LATER**

Arriving breathless, Steeves finds the deer lying face down in the trap. He grabs the revolver and drags the carcass back towards the cabin; blood staining the snow red in it's wake.

Halfway to the shed, Steeves hears a low GROWL.

He freezes. Stands guard over the carcass in steely silence, glancing in every direction, ear to the night.

A twig SNAPS... A SHAPE slinks out of the woods.

STRIKING YELLOW EYES burn through the darkness...

A THICK COYOTE plants one paw forward, CRUNCHING into the icy earth. Its other front paw rises at a 45 degree tilt. Head cocked, pointed directly at Steeves.

Steeves reaches a shaky hand into his pocket, retrieving his revolver. Chamber loose, ALL SIX BULLETS ROLL OUT, scatter.

Steeves reaches down; stops short. Eyes connecting with a second COYOTE silhouetted in the moonlight to his right.

A SNAP, and he turns his head to find ANOTHER at his left.

Steeves bends down. Goes for the deer instead of the ammo, lifting the young buck over his shoulders.

He stands tall. BLOOD SLIDING down his flight suit. The thick coyote steps forward initiating a staring contest...

Suddenly, Steeves breaks into a SHAMBLING run for the shed--

One coyote HOWLS. Another CHARGES.

Feeling them hot on his tail, Steeves spins-- holds the deer high over his head, and ROARS until his lungs empty.

The coyotes stop on a dime, eyeing Steeves. Curiosity, fear.

Ten feet from the door, he takes two slow steps backward, baring his yellow teeth, GROWLING at the hunched animals.

He turns, quick, dashes for the shed as the coyotes CHARGE. Steeves reaches the door on a STUMBLE, hurls the deer inside and SLAMS it shut behind.

**INT. SHED - CONTINUOUS**

Steeves tips a CABINET in front of the door. Slumps against it as the coyotes CLAW, SCRATCH and HOWL at the other side.

Steeves runs his hand through his hair, straining to catch his breath. He looks at his palm-- STAINED DARK RED.

Blood drips down his face like tears.

**EXT. SHED - SIMPSON MEADOW CAMPING GROUNDS - MORNING**

A *BATTERED DEER* hangs from its hind legs.

*Steeves* tugs on a rope, raising the deer higher.

PASTOR BEN (PRE-LAP)  
Why do bad things happen to good  
people?

TRANSITION TO:

**INT. UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - TRUMBULL, CT - DAY**

*Steeves* and his family sit in the front row of a modest church-- stained glass, salmon colored walls-- attracting whispers and glances from MEMBERS of the congregation.

PASTOR BEN  
The life of Job, a true believer in  
the sovereignty of the Lord,  
reminds us that nothing happens by  
chance. Even the tragedies of our  
lives are in His hands; He is in  
absolute control, always and  
forever. We can find faith, and  
healing, in this fundamental truth.

*Steeves* gaze fixes on the Pastor, hanging on every word.

PASTOR BEN (CONT'D)  
Chapter 42, verse 2: "I know that  
You can do all things, and that no  
purpose of Yours can be thwarted."

Pastor Ben meets eyes with the *Steeves* family.

PASTOR BEN (CONT'D)  
Let us pray.

*Steeves* and Pastor Ben exchange a smile before bowing heads.

**EXT. CEMETERY - DAY**

*Steeves* stands in front of his own grave. Rita behind him, at a respectful distance. After a long silence;

STEEVES  
What's down there, an empty box?

RITA

We buried a shirt of yours, and  
your first pair of flight goggles.

STEEVES

Honestly?

Rita nods, cracking a smile.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

I want those back.

They laugh at the absurdity of it all. Steeves senses Rita's guard lowering, seizes the opportunity.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

I just hope we can bury all that  
happened before with that guy down  
there. Start fresh. With family and  
God at the center.

Rita fiddles with her bracelet, mood shifting.

RITA

Just talking to you right now,  
David-- it's strange. I felt in my  
heart you were gone.

STEEVES

All I can ask is you'll try.

After some hesitation, Rita nods.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

C'mon. Let's leave the man to his  
dirt.

Steeves leads her away from the grave, toward an idling car  
with his FAMILY inside.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

Which shirt did you bury?

RITA

Your favorite.

STEEVES

Not the Hawaiian?

Rita smirks.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

You just wanted it out of the  
house.

RITA  
It was so loud, I couldn't hear  
myself think.

**INT. BUNGALOW - CRAIG AIR FORCE BASE - SELMA, AL - DAY**

Blair sits in a bungalow across from COLONEL DUSARD (42),  
Steeves' impassioned commanding officer.

BLAIR  
How many fliers downed this year?

Dusard looks uneasy about the question.

DUSARD  
We like keeping those numbers close  
to the vest, you know that.

Blair tucks his notebook away.

BLAIR  
Between us.

Off the record-- Dusard loosens up.

DUSARD  
One jet mishap is one too many. But  
it happens more often than we'd  
like to admit. Hell, a pilot in  
Steeves' squadron-- Lieutenant  
Glenn Sutton-- went down in the  
Sierras not three months earlier.

BLAIR  
Steeves knew him?

DUSARD  
They were good pals.

Blair raises a brow.

BLAIR  
What do you suppose caused Steeves'  
crash?

DUSARD  
An explosion that affects the  
cockpit is unusual in a T-33; but I  
take Steeves' word for it.

Blair spots the BASE COMMANDER peering through the window.

BLAIR  
Any trouble keeping him in line?

Dusard laughs, deflecting.

DUSARD  
What airman isn't trouble? Gotta have a little crazy to sign up to dive 5 G's with a T-12 Cloudmaker in your bay. Nobody knows that better than you.

Blair smiles, humoring his old AF buddy. But he's a journalist now, he's gotta ask;

BLAIR  
What kind of trouble?

DUSARD  
Nothing we didn't get into and out of ourselves. The kid's a regular Chuck Yeager-- logged 900-plus flying hours before his ordeal. That's what's important.

Blair eyes him curiously. Then decides to drop it.

BLAIR  
I appreciate the time.

DUSARD  
Anything for a washed up airman.

The men shake. Blair notices a few GREY UNIFORMED OFFICIALS talking to a short, sandy-haired PILOT outside the bungalow.

BLAIR  
Am I late to the party?

DUSARD  
OSI. Just closing out the accident report. All routine.

BLAIR  
Who's that they're talking to?

DUSARD  
Some friend of the kid's.

BLAIR  
Any idea what about?

DUSARD  
I don't remember you being a gnat.

Blair puts his hands up in mock-surrender.

BLAIR

I'm a journo now, Colonel. Have to ask the obvious.

DUSARD

Take care, Captain.

Blair turns, walks out the door. Dusard keeps one eye on him through his window until he disappears into a sedan.

**INT. FORD - CONTINUOUS**

Blair starts the engine and drives slowly by the OSI interviewing the pilot. He surreptitiously eyes the encounter, zeroing in on the airman's lapel.

He drives off and turns out of the base but as soon as he's out of sight, he pulls to the side of the road, flips open his notebook, and writes down the name: "Captain Webber."

**EXT. SKYSCRAPER - ROOFTOP - NEW YORK CITY - DAY**

Overlooking the glimmering metropolis of NYC, Steeves and family pose like statues along the railing.

A PHOTOGRAPHER loads his camera. McGinnis stands beside him with that tireless smile.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Harold, can I have your right hand on the railing.

Harold clutches the railing with his left hand. Elsie smacks it down.

ELSIE

Oh, for crying out loud, Harold.

She grabs his right and guides it to the railing.

HAROLD

He wasn't clear.

ELSIE

Have your hearing checked.

HARRY

(to Steeves)

Nothing's changed there, brother.



(NY21)NEW YORK, July 4-SIGHTSEERS-A far cry from rugged territory in the California Sierras where he spent 54 days, U.S. Air Force Lt. David A. Steeves takes in the Manhattan skyline with his family today. From left, are:Steeves' wife, Rita;the flier; his mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Harold W. Steeves, of Trumbull, Conn., and his brother, Harold. Steeves and his family were reunited earlier on his arrival at LaGuardia Field from the West Coast. His ordeal started when his jet trainer exploded and he bailed out over the high mountains. (APWirephoto)(see story)(b/jwb51645atf- PD)57.

Steeves grins, a pipe in his mouth.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Terrific. Lieutenant, may I ask you to hold Rita's waist. She can place her hand on yours.

Steeves waits for Rita to put her hand on his before gently touching her waist.

The photographer SNAPS a few shots.

PHOTOGRAPHER (CONT'D)

Fantastic. And that's our 1A.

MCGINNIS

(to Harold and Elsie)

Did you ever think you'd grace the cover of The Saturday Evening Post?

HAROLD

Not in a million years.

ELSIE

David was the star of all his school plays. I always knew one day he'd leave a mark.

Harold pats his son on the back.

HAROLD

We're just happy he's sharing his miracle with us.

Harold chokes up. Steeves grabs his father's shoulder, basking in his praise. Rita looks on, moved by the encounter.

ED SULLIVAN (PRE-LAP)

I'd like you all to meet someone rather special.

#### **INT. CBS STUDIOS - ED SULLIVAN SHOW**

ED SULLIVAN stands before us, the TV personality who will go on to introduce Elvis and the Beatles to America. He's got his hands in his pockets and a sway to his step.

ED SULLIVAN

If you haven't heard about my friend already, Lieutenant David Steeves pulled himself out of the wild after surviving fifty-four days in the Sierra mountains.

(MORE)

ED SULLIVAN (CONT'D)  
We're fortunate enough to have him  
here in our audience today.

The camera finds David and his whole family front and center.

ED SULLIVAN (CONT'D)  
Lieutenant, and family, welcome.

STEEVES  
Hello, Ed.

SULLIVAN  
How does it feel to be out of the  
woods?

STEEVES  
Hard to put into words exactly.

ED SULLIVAN  
I bet. What would you say makes it  
so a guy like you can do something  
so sensational?

STEEVES  
Dad used to take me hunting. Some  
of that certainly came of use.

HAROLD  
When Dave was younger, he learned  
to trap small animals-- woodchucks,  
raccoons. Skinned their hides  
cleaner than I ever could.

ED SULLIVAN  
You were prepared to face the wild.

ELSIE  
David has a mind of his own;  
always full of plans. My mother  
thought he'd grow up to be an  
inventor.

Steeves beams.

STEEVES  
If I didn't have a family to return  
to, Ed, I'd still be out there  
wandering the Sierras.

ED SULLIVAN  
I understand you hunkered down in a  
shed for some time?

STEEVES

That's right. 'Til an earthquake  
hit the basin, tore it apart. Sent  
me on my way pretty quick.

ED SULLIVAN

You always hear California's lovely  
this time of year.

Canned laughter from the studio audience.

### **BACKSTAGE**

GENERAL CURTIS LEMAY towers over McGinnis. His immaculate  
uniform hugs his thick frame below a heavy, stone-face.

GENERAL LEMAY

That was no earthquake.

Off McGinnis's confused look--

GENERAL LEMAY (CONT'D)

That was a fission bomb outta  
Frenchman Flat knocked his ass out  
of bed.

McGinnis looks ahead, thrilled to be rubbing shoulders with  
the Pentagon's top brass, but unnerved nonetheless.

### **BACK ON STAGE**

ED SULLIVAN

Rita, this must have been nothing  
short of incredible for you. At any  
point did you think you might not  
see your husband again?

Rita digs deep for the right answer.

RITA

A wife never loses hope.

She exchanges a smile with Steeves.

### **INT. BACKSTAGE - CBS STUDIOS - ED SULLIVAN SHOW - LATER**

After the broadcast, Steeves separates from his family to  
join McGinnis and Lemay.

MCGINNIS

Lieutenant Steeves.

STEEVES  
(salutes)  
General Lemay. It's an honor, sir.

LEMAY  
At ease.

Lemay sizes Steeves up.

LEMAY (CONT'D)  
Hell of a thing you did out there,  
Lieutenant. Hell of a thing.

STEEVES  
People seem to think so.

LEMAY  
You don't?

STEEVES  
Saved my skin, that's all.

LeMay motions to the studio lights and cameras.

LEMAY  
Not out of the woods yet, huh?

STEEVES  
Sorry, how do you mean?

LEMAY  
You're representing the United  
States Air Force on national  
television. No easy task.

STEEVES  
Any pointers?

LEMAY  
I'll leave that to the experts.

LeMay pats McGinnis on the back.

LEMAY (CONT'D)  
Enjoy your leave, Lieutenant. Watch  
yourself out there.

STEEVES  
Thank you, sir.

Steeves and McGinnis salute. Lemay walks off to an exit.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
Did I say something wrong?

MCGINNIS

There's a reason even his closest friends call him 'Iron Ass.' You're doing just fine, Lieutenant. Arthur Godfrey's up next. He has a rather overt way of warming up to his guests.

**INT. ELEVATOR - BILTMORE HOTEL - NIGHT**

Rita and Steeves in a swanky elevator, moving up and up, heading to "P." Steeves looks to the OPERATOR monitoring their ascent.

STEEVES

Don't suppose that stands for--

OPERATOR

Penthouse, sir. Only the best for guests of Mr. Godfrey.

The doors open to a private suite. Stunning view of the skyline offered through panoramic windows.

A bottle of champagne sticking out of a sterling silver ice bucket on the night stand.

The BELLHOP wheels their luggage into the room. Then leave Rita and Steeves with jaws wide.

BELLHOP

Enjoy your stay at the Biltmore.

**INT. STUDIO - ANOTHER DAY**

Steeves and Rita sit across from CBS host ARTHUR GODFREY.

ARTHUR GODFREY

So the view from your office-- it's better than mine.

STEEVES

35,000 feet is quite a view. Except when you're falling through it.

LAUGHTER from the audience.

ARTHUR GODFREY

Right. So you're up there, gliding along at break-neck speed, when--

STEEVES

An explosion in the fuselage  
knocked me out cold.

Arthur Godfrey makes a face to his audience, hamming it up.

ARTHUR GODFREY

Talk about a rough day at the  
office.

More LAUGHTER.

**INT. DONOHUE'S STEAK HOUSE - NIGHT**

A bustling Midtown restaurant where the social elite dine on Saturdays and the middle-class save for special occasions.

Steeves and Rita sit with Arthur and his wife, MARY.

ARTHUR GODFREY

The spending should be increased  
ten-fold. This is the one dramatic  
advantage we have over the Reds.  
Enhanced strategic air power.

A waiter comes by with a bottle of Sherry.

MARY GODFREY

Yes, he'll have another. Until it  
comes out his ears.

The waiter fills Arthur's glass. Moves on to Steeves.

STEEVES

Oh, no thank you.

ARTHUR GODFREY

Nonsense. You both deserve a drink.

MARY GODFREY

Arthur loves himself an airman.

RITA

I'll have a glass.

Steeves glances at Rita, surprised as her glass fills with an honest pour. The waiter turns to Steeves, bottle tilted.

STEEVES

That's alright.

The Waiter moves on; Rita notices. She smiles to herself.

ARTHUR GODFREY

As I was saying, the wars of my childhood-- Army and Navy beat the drum. But war like this, the Air Force is front and center. We won't have to drop a single bomb-- just as long as they know we got the planes to drop them--

A homely MAN approaches the table with a look of disbelief.

MAN

Sorry to bother, I never do this, but could I have your autograph?

Arthur Godfrey smiles graciously. He offers his hand to get it over with.

But the man produces a newspaper with a picture of Steeves on the cover. He hands it to a Steeves with a pen.

MAN (CONT'D)

The old lady would never believe me otherwise.

Surprised, Steeves takes the pen. Stares at the picture-- surreal to see his face on the cover.

STEEVES

Just my name?

MAN

Made out to Margaret.

Steeves signs over his face in sweeping cursive. The man walks away, delighted, as Arthur breaks into a hardy laugh.

He raises a glass.

ARTHUR GODFREY

Welcome to the club, Lieutenant.

**EXT. DONOHUE'S STEAK HOUSE - NIGHT**

Steeves and Rita walk out into the electric night-- flashing marquees, throngs of pedestrians, yellow taxis streaking by.

RITA

The look on your face!

STEEVES

Nearly forgot how to sign my own name.

They laugh, fingers interlacing. Steeves looks into his wife's smiling eyes. This is the high school sweetheart he fell in love with years ago.

He glances around the crowded city street, orienting himself.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

I've got an idea. Maybe my best.

RITA

(teasing)

Well that's a low bar--

Steeves takes off running with Rita's hand still locked in his. Together they dodge a blur of pedestrians-- long coats, fancy hats, handbags, heels, canes-- laughing like teenagers.

**EXT. CAROUSEL - CENTRAL PARK - NIGHT**

Steeves and Rita rise and fall, cheering on the animals they've chosen to ride on the carousel.

Children seated beside them point and giggle at their antics.

**EXT. CENTRAL PARK - LATER**

Underneath the twirling market lights of the carousel, Steeves and Rita slow dance. He hums to her. "It Had to be You," their favorite song.

Rita holds his gaze without an ounce of hesitation, feeling in this moment that her husband has truly changed.

**INT. BILTMORE HOTEL - NIGHT**

Rita touches Steeves' face, tipsy still, but sincere.

RITA

Did you mean what you said?

STEEVES

What I said?

RITA

That you don't need anything more than us. More than our family.

STEEVES

With all my heart.



gettyimages®  
Fresno Bee

Rita's other hand moves up his chest. They kiss passionately as Rita guides Steeves to the plush mattress.

**LATER**

Rita lies awake in bed next to Steeves who snores lightly. Sober now, processing her decision to sleep with her husband.

Conflicting emotions battling it out in her heart and mind.

CUT TO:

**EXT. WOODS - SIERRAS - DUSK - FLASHBACK**

*ALIVE*, Steeves stirs. Blinks. A groggy hand swipes off his *SHATTERED AVIATORS*; face awash with confusion.

He lifts his head off the rock. Rubs his temple. *BLACK BLOOD* sticking to his fingers like tar.

Head throbbing, he labors to a sitting position. His flight suit is starched with ice. Frail body shivering beneath it.

Steeves glances up to an empty sky. He feels it now, in his gut, the utter isolation.

He shudders. Tears shake loose, stream down his cheeks.

**WOODS - LATER**

Every other step is a stumble, legs no longer obeying orders.

Fifteen days without food, he chews on snow until his tongue bleeds raw. His beard matted and full, cheeks gaunt. A weary eye visible through the crack in his Aviators.

All ten of his fingertips are blackened with frost bite, advancing up his fingers like a dark army.

He slowly rattles off jet models under his breath, trying to keep his mind above water.

STEEVES

Convair F-106 Delta Dart...

Douglas... F4D Skyray?

(pause)

Grunman F-9 Cougar... no, Panther.

Lockheed... Lockheed, shit.

McDonnell... F3H Demon-

Then, a faint, familiar HUM...

Steeves tilts his head, throwing his balance. Listens to the irregular TRILL of an engine. Somewhere above the clouds, the sound of a plane crossing the sky... But is it real?

His heart POUNDS. Vision blurs. Shadows distort, trees bend at impossible angles. He stops walking, terrified.

The landscape SLANTS at full-tilt, then SPINS into oblivion.

A PANIC ATTACK grabs Steeves by the throat. He brings a hand to his heart, dropping to his knees. He hacks and hacks, emptying his stomach, phlegm and blood hitting snow.

When he finally gathers himself and looks up, he sees it. Through a break in the dense forest, a hundred yards away...

A GOD-SEND.

SIMPSON MEADOW CAMP GROUNDS

Steeves rubs the haze from his eyes. The sign's still there. And just beyond it, a SHED.

**EXT. SHED - MOMENTS LATER**

A rusty iron padlock hangs on the front door of a compact wood structure.

Steeves spots a baseball-sized rock with a jagged edge.

He smashes the padlock. No luck.

Again. Nothing. Steeves eyes go bug-eyed with desperation. He summons every last ounce of strength and SMASHES it over and over and over...

The lock flies off the handle as he collapses in exhaustion. Steeves pushes the door open with his foot and gazes inside.

**INT. SHED - CONTINUOUS**

No larger than sixty square feet, the shed is packed with tools and equipment; an outpost for forest rangers.

A RODENT scurries off a shelf and out the door as Steeves grabs for a box labelled "FOODSTUFFS." He rips it open, gaping into the box like it's filled with pure gold:

Can of beans, one of hash, another of tomatoes; two packages of gelatine; a half box of lump sugar; a coffee can one-third full of rice; another half full of pinto beans;

two packages of dehydrated soup; a bottle of ketchup and a wide assortment of spices and condiments, mustard, salt, garlic, Tabasco...

Steeves drinks ketchup from the bottle, slurping it down so fast he nearly chokes. He gathers himself. Rations the rest.

**INT. SHED - NIGHT**

Steeves drags tent canvas over to a ravaged camping mattress.

He sits down, unlaces his boots. Carefully maneuvers them off his feet. He grimaces; the pain excruciating.

His legs are in a terrible way: BLUE and ORANGE extending halfway to his knees; feet SWELLING before his eyes.

He bundles himself in the tent canvas, SHOUTING the moment the canvas touches his legs.

Frost webs across a small window above Steeves as he curls up and falls headlong into a deep, feverish sleep.

**INT. SHED - DAWN**

Steeves wakes to the sound of CRUNCHING LEAVES outside.

FOOTSTEPS, approaching the shed--

TRANSITION TO:

**EXT. ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY - MORNING**

Blair sits on a bench before rows and rows of ghost white tombstones, jotting down notes in his journal. Just above the treeline behind him, the formidable walls of the Pentagon.

A SUITED MAN sits down on the bench beside him, nervous. Blair keeps his eyes on the journal as he speaks.

BLAIR

Were you followed, Jim?

JIM glances in the direction he came. He's a thin man in his early 30s, prone to trembling levels of anxiety.

JIM

I don't think so, no.

BLAIR

Good. Maybe we won't be hung for treason after all.

Jim picks up on the sarcasm, doesn't like it.

JIM

This flier's got a lot of heat on him, buddy. The last person who held this folder was the Vice Chief of Staff.

BLAIR

(intrigued)  
LeMay?

Jim produces a manila folder from his coat. Another glance over his shoulder before he slides the folder to Blair.

JIM

If you were anyone else.

BLAIR

Thank you, I mean that.

Blair shuffles through loose pages, arriving at the end.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

Where's the postmortem on the jet?

Jim leans in.

JIM

(whisper)  
It hasn't been found.

Blair takes a moment to process this, puzzled.

BLAIR

How long did they search?

JIM

They're still searching. Combed a 50 mile radius ten times over-- not a trace where he claimed to have deployed.

BLAIR

That's why the OSI's on the case?

JIM

Doesn't matter. Guy's been branded a hero already-- hell, enlistment's spiked twenty percent since the story broke-- they wouldn't dare revoke the title shy of him caught with a hammer and sickle.

(beat)

If I were you, I'd let God be the judge on this one.

Jim collects the folder, slides it in his briefcase.

BLAIR

Then why show me the report?

Jim looks over the cemetery.

JIM

My brother died saying your name. You're the kind of guy this kid could never be. That's all I need to know. What you do with it-- well, that's your decision now.

Jim stands and heads off down the path. Blair is left gazing out over the sea of tombstones. Deep in thought.

MCGINNIS (PRE-LAP)

Before you get out there, a piece of advice...

**INT. BACKSTAGE - TV STUDIO**

McGinnis lowers into Steeves' eyeline, like a boxing coach.

MCGINNIS

You've lived through something extraordinary. Don't hold back. The whole nation is watching.

Steeves nods, realizing what's being asked of him.

**INT. STUDIO - WIDE WIDE WORLD**

Host Dave Garroway, and an audience, riveted by--

STEEVES

... tossed the bloody carcass through the cabin door, and bolted it up-- just in time to deprive the pack their dinner.

GASPS from the studio audience.

Rita in the front row, no longer on stage. Seeing Steeves from the audience POV.

DAVE GARROWAY  
If the cold wasn't enough!

**INT. STUDIO - FLATT AND SCRUGGS SHOW**

Steeves on stage with the host, FLATT. He jumps out of his seat, acting out the scene in gripping detail, enjoying this.

STEEVES  
I'm buck-naked, boots tied around my neck and everything I own held high above my head as I wade into the current--

FLATT  
-- quite an image for our viewers.

STEEVES  
I'll tell you what was quite an image. The 30-foot waterfall I was set to barrel over like a piece of drift wood.

**INT. NEW STUDIO**

The story has grown BIGGER, not unlike--

STEEVES  
A massive deer. Biggest I'd ever seen.

Steeves reminisces with a million dollar smile.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
After three weeks eating nothing but ice and grass-- it was the happiest moment of my life.

He looks over to Rita in the audience.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
Well, second happiest. Marrying that beautiful woman had it beat.

The audience eats it up. Rita smiles dimly, put off by all the theatrics.

**EXT. BUSCH STADIUM - ST. LOUIS - DAY**

A packed stadium on their feet for the Seventh Inning Stretch of the Major League Baseball All-Star game.

FANS

(singing)

*For it's one, two, three strikes  
you're out, at the old ball game!*

Rita sits in the stands with Leisa in her lap. Harold and Elsie are there with Harry, his wife Ruth and son BOBBY.

The RUMBLE of a jet draws near. They look to the sky.

STADIUM PA ANNOUNCER

Ladies and Gentleman... back from  
54 days in the wild... America's  
own... Lieutenant David Steeves!

A SILVER JET streaks through the sky, just above the stadium walls - a thunderous CLAP.

On the field, YOGI BERRA and TED WILLIAMS stare up at the jet, clapping their mitts. The country's biggest stars admiring one of the newest to join their ranks.

The stadium erupts in CHEERS.

**INT. JET**

Steeves at the helm, his eyes smiling behind aviator goggles.

RADIO HOST (PRE-LAP)

So you've just come to in a cockpit  
full of smoke.

**INT. RADIO STUDIO - DAY**

Steeves sits with headphones beside a RADIO HOST. McGinnis is seated on the other side of the glass alongside Rita.

RADIO HOST

What's in your mind at that moment?  
Are you terrified?

STEEVES

No. My mind went straight to the  
training I received from the Air  
Force. It's hard to panic when  
you've been trained for worse.

McGinnis' nods affirmation; Rita flashes concern.

**INT. TOWN CAR - NYC - DAY**

Rita and Steeves ride in silence down 5th Avenue, beneath the gleaming skyscrapers.

RITA  
Why did you change your story?

STEEVES  
Which part?

RITA  
From what you've told me, you were  
terribly afraid.

Their town car slows to a stop at a light.

STEEVES  
This is who they want me to be.

RITA  
Who, David?

STEEVES  
The Air Force.  
(pointing)  
I represent more than myself now.

Rita follows Steeves' hand, surprised to find a forty foot poster of him outside her window-- a towering recruitment ad for the Air Force fixed to an apartment building.

And below the billboard, an elderly WOMAN with sunken cheeks leans out of her window to pour water from a milk bottle into her battered orange flowerpot.

Rita fixes on this woman as they motor past, the enchantment of the city fading from her eyes.

AL (PRE-LAP)  
*Well, I told your Mama that you'd  
be in by ten. Well, Susie baby,  
looks like we goofed again!*

**INT. STATION WAGON - FAIRFIELD, CT - DAY**

Steeves taps his hands on the steering wheel to the beat of "Wake up little Susie" by the Everly Brothers.

Al sits in the passenger seat, singing poorly, hair blowing in the wind.

AL  
*Wake up, little Susie, wake up!*

They pass a Jaguar dealership.

AL (CONT'D)  
 Whoa, whoa-- slow down.

STEEVES  
 We gotta get the food back.

AL  
 Let's just have a quick peak.

Steeves glances in his rear-view. Hangs a U-turn. Al grins.

**INT. JAGUAR DEALERSHIP - LATER**

Steeves admires his reflection in a lacquered mint green '56 XKSS Roadster Convertible.

SALESMAN  
 She's a stunner. Looks even better  
 topping 75 on the highway.

STEEVES  
 Been a dream of mine to own one.

SALESMAN  
 And what's stopping this dream from  
 coming true today?

AL  
 Great question!

Al pulls Steeves aside. Sensing an ally, the salesman gives them privacy.

AL (CONT'D)  
 How much did the Post offer?

STEEVES  
 Not enough for this.

AL  
 Then call them and make it enough.  
 I'm tired of seeing my friend act  
 like he doesn't know how to get  
 what he wants--  
 (MORE)

AL (CONT'D)  
(pats Steeves' chest)  
What he *deserves!*

Steeves is slowly coming around. Al tilts the scales further.

AL (CONT'D)  
You're famous now, Dave. You think Brando drives around in his mother-in-law's station wagon?

STEEVES  
I shook on it.

AL  
You didn't sign on a dotted line.  
(beat)  
Listen, I know you're a man of your word, but the Post is taking advantage of you. Do you know how many magazines they're going to sell when your story hits the shelves? Only a sucker doesn't know his own worth.

Al pats Steeves on the back and returns to the salesman.

AL (CONT'D)  
Where's the nearest phone?

SALESMAN  
Got to check with the Misses, huh?

AL  
Something like that.

The salesman shows Steeves and Al to a rotary phone.

SALESMAN  
Take your time. Remind her how hard you've worked for this.

The Salesman winks, then walks off.

AL  
Prove to me you're still the guy who once convinced a bum to give you a smoke.

Steeves slides Blair's card out of his wallet. Dials.

**INT. HOTEL BAR - VIRGINIA - DAY**

Blair sits alone at the bar of a hotel, writing in his notebook. A BARTENDER approaches with a telephone in hand.

BARTENDER  
Mr. Blair?

Blair looks up from his work.

BARTENDER (CONT'D)  
Your office has transferred a call.

He reaches for the phone.

**INTERCUT** between the Jaguar Dealership and the Hotel Bar.

BLAIR (ON PHONE)  
Clay Blair Jr.

STEEVES (ON PHONE)  
Mr. Blair. David Steeves.

BLAIR  
Lieutenant.

STEEVES  
Listen, about your offer. I got to be honest; I don't know much about how an exclusive works.

BLAIR  
Well, we'll go up to Kings Canyon. Retrace your steps. I'll take notes, snap a few photos, ask a few questions. Simple as that, really.

STEEVES  
But there's, uh, a little more to it than that, right?

BLAIR  
How do you mean?

STEEVES  
"Exclusive" means you're the only print journalist who can tell my story, in my own words.

Blair senses Steeves' advance. His face sets like a rock.

BLAIR  
As I told you at the barbecue--

STEEVES

Not to come off as ignorant or ungrateful, but I've been told there are other folks like yourself who'd also like to tell my story.

BLAIR

You've been told?

STEEVES

I do think you're a fine journalist, Mr Blair, but there are plenty of fine publications--

BLAIR

What exactly are you asking, Lieutenant?

STEEVES

Well, you have magazines to sell, and I have a family I'd like to start providing for now that I've been graced with a second chance.

BLAIR

Eight grand not enough to feed a family these days?

Steeves eyes Al who eggs him on.

STEEVES

To be straight with you, Mr. Blair... I'm deliberating if you're the right man for the job.

(beat)

I was hoping you might be able to alleviate my concerns.

Al fist pumps, loving this side of Steeves. There's a lengthy silence, as Steeves tenses.

BLAIR

Ten thousand, not a penny more.

Steeves pauses for effect. Then--

STEEVES

You've got yourself an exclusive.

Steeves hangs up and hugs Al in celebration.

SALESMAN

Smile like that, I'd say the Mrs. just gave you the thumbs up.

STEEVES

The sign in the window said you take credit?

SALESMAN

Matter of fact, buddy. We prefer it.

**INT. HOTEL BAR - CONTINUOUS**

Blair sets the phone down. He slides his glasses off and rubs his eyes. Not happy he just got squeezed-- but more than that, he feels personally betrayed.

He opens his book. Flips over a few pages, and stops on one with a name: "Captain Webber."

He eyes the luggage at his feet. He could go home as planned, but he picks up the phone instead. Dials a number by heart.

BLAIR

Jim. One more favor to ask.

**INT. RITA'S FAMILY HOME - FAIRFIELD, CT**

Rita stacks textbooks into a cardboard box: "The Psychology of Adjustment," "The Hidden Persuaders," etc.

Leisa fiddles with a book, titled "Fear and Rage."

RITA

You're far too young.

She reaches for the book. Leisa hesitates.

LEISA

Why are you putting them away, Momma?

RITA

I'll be working in the dentist's office again. Won't that be fun?

Leisa hands over the textbook, confused.

LEISA

You're never going back to school?

Rita packs it in with the others. Staring sadly at her box full of books. Unable to look her daughter in the eye.

RITA  
We'll see.

HONK-HONK. Rita goes to the window, slides open the blinds.

Steeves is standing tall in the driveway beside the '56 Jag. He motions for her to come outside.

RITA (CONT'D)  
(sotto)  
What in the world?

**EXT. RITA'S FAMILY HOME - FAIRFIELD, CT**

Rita steps out into the driveway. Leisa follows close behind.

Steeves leans against his Jag with a sly grin.

STEEVES  
I'd like to take my family out for  
a drive.

RITA  
...David.

STEEVES  
C'mon, hop in. I'll explain it all  
at the beach.

**INT. JAGUAR - COASTAL ROAD, CT - DAY**

Steeves has one hand on the wheel. Rita in the passenger seat with Leisa on her lap. Sea breeze blowing in their faces, sail boats racing on the horizon. Chuck Berry's "Maybellene" plays loud on the radio.

Rita abruptly shuts off the music.

RITA  
How can we possibly afford this?

STEEVES  
I had it in my mind that I'd tell  
you with our feet in the sand.

RITA  
Where did the money come from?

Steeves is let down by his wife's tone.

STEEVES

The Post. They're paying me ten thousand for the exclusive.

Rita turns her attention to the coastline.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

I imagined this going differently.

RITA

I don't know what to say. That's an incredible amount of money, David.

STEEVES

Money is necessary. We can't bring up Leisa in an orderly way without money-- we can't eat, or think in an orderly way without money.

RITA

We don't need more than we have.

STEEVES

Rita. We're living in your mother's basement.

RITA

Until we figure out what's next.

STEEVES

I'll tell you what's next. We're moving our family to California. The Air Force will approve the transfer, they owe me that much.

RITA

California? Why would we leave?

Steeves touches her leg.

STEEVES

We used to dream about a life like that, remember? For all we've been through, we deserve this! And a whole helluva lot more. This exclusive is our golden ticket out of this... stagnant life.

Rita shuts down completely. Steeves powers through a bend in the road, taken aback by Rita's reaction.

He flips on the radio-- Elvis' "Blue Suede Shoes" drowns out the heavy silence as Steeves focuses on the turns ahead.

CUT TO:

**EXT. RIVER BANK - LATER**

Steeves squats by a tree, attempting to shit. It's a clear day. Blue skies. He fills out his flight suit with the build of Johnny Unitas; beard just beginning to grow in.

All the sudden, Steeves starts to sing.

STEEVES

(tone deaf, off rhythm)

Well you can knock me down, step in  
my face, slander my name, all over  
the place. Do anything that you  
want to do, but uh-uh, honey, lay  
off of my blue suede shoes.

Steeves peers over the rim of his unbroken Aviators at his marred boots, laughing-- finding real solace in this song.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

You can do ANYTHING, but stay off  
my blue suede shoes...

Then, just as Steeves is about to have the first bowel movement he's had in days...

A faint, almost imperceptible HUM.

Steeves peeks up through the tree canopies and there it is, far in the distance--

A PLANE crisscrossing the sky, headed towards him in a slow, methodical pattern...

A search pattern.

Steeves spots a clearing up ahead, pulls up his flight suit, and charges toward it.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

HERE!

His face pales-- frail muscles strain as he breaks into a limping jog, seething with every stride...

STEEVES (CONT'D)

DOWN HERE!

*Just as he's about to reach the clearing, his sprained left leg BENDS AT THE ANKLE, sending all 180 pounds of Steeves plummeting...*

*HEAD HITTING ROCK with a SICK THUD.*

**EXT. WOODS - SIERRAS - DUSK**

*ALIVE, Steeves stirs. Blinks. A groggy hand swipes off his SHATTERED AVIATORS; face awash with confusion.*

TRANSITION TO:

**EXT. TRAILER - SELMA, AL - NIGHT**

Blair's Ford is parked down the street from a row of trailers inhabited by airmen, down the road from the Craig Air Base.

**INT. FORD - CONTINUOUS**

Blair flips through a file with the name "CAPTAIN RONALD WEBBER." We spot the photo of the man from the Air Force base, who SUDDENLY appears at the window, gripping a crowbar.

WEBBER

Why are you after me?!

Blair holds his hands up.

BLAIR

I'm going to roll my window down.

Blair cranks his window a couple inches.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

Don't get too many visitors out this way?

Webber doesn't know what to make of him.

WEBBER

Who are you?

BLAIR

Just a guy interested in what you might have to say, Captain.

**INT. TRAILER - LATER**

Blair sits at a breakfast nook in the sparse trailer. Webber leans against the door, maintaining distance.

BLAIR

We're on a story about an airman who taught aviation while you were a cadet.

WEBBER

Lieutenant David Arthur Steeves. Why talk to me?

Blair nods.

BLAIR

Just running background.

WEBBER

You drove all the way out here in the middle of the night, for what-- my endorsement of the guy?

BLAIR

I know you had a word with the Base Commander a week before Steeves fell out of the sky.

Webber cocks his head. Not what he was expecting.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

And I saw you last Friday having a friendly chat with the OSI.

WEBBER

So you want to know why one day the Lieutenant's teaching us the ropes on the T-33 and the next he's scrubbing grease off propellers?

BLAIR

Why did the base commander strip his authority, weeks before he disappeared?

WEBBER

I tell you that, I lose my wings.

Blair's interest spikes. Webber smiles. It's unsettling.

WEBBER (CONT'D)

Everybody wants to believe in miracles. So bad they'd ignore the facts staring them dead in the eye.

Blair meets Webber's stare and doesn't blink.

BLAIR

Let's say I'm someone who doesn't believe in anything. What would you tell me then?

WEBBER

I'd tell you off the record what I told the OSI on.

BLAIR

Oh. And what's that?

Webber looks at Blair's note pad. Blair slides pen and pad in his back pocket, respecting the 'off record' request. Then, with earnest intensity--

WEBBER

The whole nation's been hoaxed.

**INT. BAR - FAIRFIELD, CT - NIGHT**

Al sets two pints of ale down on a bar table. Steeves sits across the booth, eyeing the pint like it's an old friend.

STEEVES

I don't understand it.

AL

I love, Rita. I do. But she's always been a bit of puzzle, hasn't she?

STEEVES

I should take some blame for this.

AL

Listen to you. Remember when we started up that detailing shop?

Steeves smiles at the memory.

AL (CONT'D)

Correct me if my memory is fuzzy but I recall finishing the last car of the day, and there you are, counting bills.

(MORE)

AL (CONT'D)

You tell me, 'every one of these puts me one step closer to setting my family up right'... Your intentions are more pure than a monk's. Now enjoy this drink with me, godammit.

Al holds up his glass. Steeves hesitates... then gives in, raising his pint.

AL (CONT'D)

To the High Sierras. And the low valleys. And all the land you roamed and pissed on in between.

Steeves cheers his glass on Al's.

Al pounds his drink. When Steeves goes to set his pint down, Al mimes for him to continue. Steeves drains the drink. They slam their glasses down at the same time, laughing.

Al spots a couple of attractive WOMEN in a nearby booth.

AL (CONT'D)

Another round. To clear your head.

**INT. KITCHEN - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - SIMULTANEOUS**

Rita scrubs a pot furiously with a dish rag. Esther puts her hand on the short of her back.

ESTHER

I know it's hard, Rita. I do. But you must be strong.

RITA

I had an entire new life ahead of me. Carefully constructed. Do you understand?

ESTHER

What will the paper say if you don't stand by his side? They're calling him a hero, so what would that make you? Think of Leisa.

Rita turns to face her mother.

RITA

I was happy, almost carefree, in school.

(MORE)

RITA (CONT'D)

When I finally let myself think of it, for the first time I knew how shallow our marriage had been-- how much had been missing from it. He's turning back into who he was before. Reckless, vain...

Esther takes a seat at the table.

ESTHER

Your father, before we married, once told me that he could never be enough. I took that to heart, and when he passed, I had plenty other things to live for. Including you.

Rita sets the pot on a rack, excuses herself.

RITA

Your husband never came back to life.

ESTHER

Rita...

A door shuts. Esther sighs.

**INT. BEDROOM - BEN HIBB'S RESIDENCE - NIGHT**

Ben stirs awake to the sound of his telephone RINGING. He fumbles in the dark, answers the call.

BEN

Yes?

**INT. PHONE BOOTH - NIGHT**

Blair in a phone booth, off the side of a rural highway.

BLAIR

We need to pull the exclusive.

**INTERCUT**

Ben slides on his glasses as his mind wakes.

BEN

That's not happening.

BLAIR

I have reason to believe the Lieutenant is perpetuating a hoax.

Ben's eyes open wide-- now fully awake.

BEN  
What are you talking about?

BLAIR  
He's not who he says he is.

BEN  
You went to the mat for this guy,  
Blair. Curtis is invested big.  
Shit, the whole nation is waiting  
for this story!  
(beat)  
What hoax?!

Blair's face narrows, realizing he doesn't have all the pieces yet. His silence distresses Ben further.

BLAIR  
I'll put it together.

BEN  
What the hell is going on? Blair?!

A BIG RIG kicks up a cloud of dirt as it ROARS by the booth.

Blair hangs up, and hurries out.

**INT. BAR - FAIRFIELD, CT. - SIMULTANEOUS**

Al and Steeves sit with the women Al was eyeing earlier. Al is engaged in boozy banter, but Steeves' mind is elsewhere.

AL  
I'm telling the truth. He's the  
guy. One day, you're gonna see him  
starring in a picture 'bout his own  
life.

RED LIPS  
Can't be him. In the papers he has  
that big smile.

AL  
Dave.

Steeves comes to.

AL (CONT'D)  
I think she'd like to see you  
smile.

STEEVES  
 (unsmiling)  
 ...excuse me.

Steeves slides out of the booth. Al tries to keep up the tempo as Steeves stumbles away.

AL  
 How 'bout the smile of a real flier  
 -- one who didn't down his jet?

#### HALLWAY

Steeves balances against the wall near a pay phone. He picks up the receiver, and dials zero.

STEEVES  
 Laura Miller, Oakland. This is  
 David Steeves.

Steeves holds on the line. Eyes glazed and lonely.

LAURA MILLER (ON PHONE)  
 David? Oh god, is it really you?

#### INT. BASEMENT - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - NIGHT

Footsteps descend the staircase in the dark. Rita is beneath her sheets, pretending to sleep. Steeves takes a seat on the edge of her bed. Rita has her back to him.

STEEVES  
 You don't have to say anything.  
 (beat)  
 I've messed up, more times than I  
 can count.

Steeves scratches his beard.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
 You've no reason to trust me. I'm  
 asking with all my heart you do.

He sniffs, fighting back emotion.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
 Come with me to Kings Canyon. Let  
 me prove to you who I am now.

Steeves waits for a response. Rita stays silent and still.

After a long moment, he rises from the bed, heads back towards the stairs. Movement in the sheets, then--

RITA

David.

Steeves turns. Rita sits up in the darkness.

RITA (CONT'D)

I'll go.

**INT. AIRPLANE - DAY**

Steeves and Rita sit beside each other. Rigid.

A few rows ahead, a newly wed COUPLE laugh at a private joke. Her head rests on his shoulder. His hand rubs her leg.

They both study the couple, silently comparing.

**INT. CEDAR GROVE RANGER STATION - DAY**

Steeves' GEAR is in a corner, staged like a museum display.

Blair leans in to get a better look at the parachute. He hasn't changed his clothes, or slept a wink.

Scrappy appears over his shoulder.

SCRAPPY

Fabric's singed from the heat of  
the ejection thrusters.

Blair rubs the ashen fabric between his fingers.

SCRAPPY (CONT'D)

We don't usually let folks touch  
the artifacts.

Blair gives him the side-eye: *'artifacts?'*

SCRAPPY (CONT'D)

Found it bundled up near Dusy  
Basin.

BLAIR

That's where he landed?

SCRAPPY

Slid down into the basin from the  
ledge where he landed. Lucky break.  
Ain't too many flat spots  
thereabouts.

Blair clocks the 'good fortune' and digs further.

BLAIR

Steeves ever mention why he left  
behind a parachute designed to keep  
him warm?

Scrappy never considered this.

SCRAPPY

Must not have been thinking  
straight.

Blair studies all the life-saving tools Steeves' left behind.  
Gene stands nearby, noticing Blair's skeptical gaze.

GENE

Mr. Blair. May I have a word?

**INT. HALLWAY - LATER**

Gene walks down the hallway with Blair.

GENE

Anybody told you about the fire?

Blair shakes his head.

GENE (CONT'D)

Blew straight through town-- burned  
down my barn-- took ten head of  
cattle with it.

BLAIR

Jesus-- where'd it start from?

GENE

Simpson Meadow. Forensics tells us  
it sparked before Steeves came  
knocking.

BLAIR

He would've seen the flames?

GENE

If he was where he said he was,  
he'd not only have seen the fire,  
he'd have had to survive it.

BLAIR

If I'm understanding correctly--  
you're saying Steeves lied to you.

GENE

If an omission is the same as a lie... make of it what you will.

A taxi pulls up to the station, Steeves and Rita inside.

BLAIR

Can you take us there today?

GENE

Sure. We'll see what he says. Must have just slipped his mind.

BLAIR

You believe that?

Roger watches Salty rearrange the 'artifacts.'

GENE

Well, not all of us are so convinced we have the whole picture.

**EXT. CEDAR GROVE RANGER STATION - LATER**

Steeves and Rita step out of the taxi. A star-struck DRIVER hurries to unload their luggage from the trunk.

In the light of day, surrounded by fresh greenery and budding flowers, the ranger station has a much warmer hue.

STEEVES

It looks... different.

Blair pops out of the station, and holds up a hand.

BLAIR

Lieutenant.

Steeves greets Blair with a strong handshake.

STEEVES

Mr. Blair. This is my wife, Rita.

BLAIR

We met back in Fairfield.

STEEVES

Oh yes, that's right.

RITA

Hello, again.

Rita notes the red in Blair's eyes, his weary gaze. Something curiously morose about him. Steeves misses this entirely.

STEEVES  
(enthusiastic)  
Well, should we hit the trail?

**EXT. VALLEY - KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARK - DAY**

Steeves, Rita, Blair and Gene ride donkeys over rocky terrain. Supplies are loaded on a fifth donkey, tied to and trailing Gene's animal in the rear of the pack.

Wild grass and dandelions crunch underfoot, the valley alive with fresh spring growth.

STEEVES  
I hardly recognize this... Looks a whole lot more inviting now.

BLAIR  
How would you describe it then?

STEEVES  
Like stepping into an empty ice box, and the door locks behind you.

BLAIR  
That's right. You said the same on Godfrey.

Blair notes Rita's rigid stature-- trying to decipher if she might be an accomplice in the potential charade.

BLAIR (CONT'D)  
(to Rita)  
Had you been to the Sierras before the ordeal? Family trip, perhaps?

Steeves interjects.

STEEVES  
No, Sir.

BLAIR  
But you've flown over?

STEEVES  
Sure, many times.

BLAIR  
So you must have been somewhat familiar with the terrain?

Steeves laughs.

STEEVES

About as familiar as a telescope is  
with Mars.

BLAIR

(sneers)

You're nothing if not quotable.

Steeves is unsure what to make of the remark.

**INT. SHED - SIMPSON MEADOW - LATER**

Steeves leads the crew into the shed. As they inspect the dwelling, he stands in the doorway, flooded with flashbacks.

Rita runs a finger over the carving in the wall: *Sorry for the mess -- Lt. David Steeves*, stung by its deeper meaning.

Gene mills about. Presumably looking for matches, a fire starter, or any evidence of arson.

BLAIR

Miracle you found this place.

Blair opens drawers. Everything has been emptied-- eaten or used. He snaps photographs of every nook and cranny.

GENE

Sure is-- only supply shed fifty  
miles in any direction.

Blair snaps a photo of the map carved into the wood.

BLAIR

If only your neighbor had been so  
lucky. Lieutenant Glenn Sutton.

Steeves and Rita both turn, surprised to hear the name.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

He fell off the same flight path,  
correct? What was it-- a few months  
before you disappeared?

STEEVES

November 24th. That I do remember.

RITA

We were close with the Suttons.

BLAIR

Must have been difficult to watch  
the whole thing unfold twice over.

Rita nods.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

The parallels are extraordinary.

STEEVES

Happens more often than the Air  
Force would care to admit.

Blair notes Steeves' clenched jaw, his trembling hands.

BLAIR

Can you show me the deer trap? I'd  
like to see how you fastened it.

**EXT. WOODS - DAY**

The quartet hikes through the brambles, arriving at a patch  
of woods scorched and battered by the fire.

BLAIR

Fire blazed through here, huh?

STEEVES

Guess so. The trap must have burnt  
along with the trees.

BLAIR

Gene, how many fires pass through  
the Sierras early spring, in your  
tenure?

GENE

Thirty years on the job-- this is a  
first. Season don't start till late  
May. Nobody was prepared for it.  
Not least, my cattle.

BLAIR

(to Gene)

When would you say this started?

Gene points to tree stumps unburned up to about three feet.

GENE

These stumps were spared, means  
they was under snow when the fire  
came through. That's about three  
feet-- so, couple weeks ago.

BLAIR

That's about when you were hunkered  
down in Simpson Meadow, Lieutenant.

Steeves stops in his path, clocking the inference.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

Never saw smoke from the shed?

STEEVES

No, sir.

Blair presses further.

BLAIR

Did you ever think to start a fire?  
That's the first thing I'd do.

STEEVES

I thought about it, sure. But if  
the fire jumped the river, it might  
have taken the shed. At the least,  
frighten away the game.

BLAIR

Is it possible an ember from one of  
your nightly fires caught wind and  
crossed the river anyway?

Steeves scratches his beard.

STEEVES

Anything's possible, I suppose.

Blair bends down with his camera, snaps a shot of the stump.

BLAIR

You know Captain Webber said  
something strange to me when I  
spoke to him the other day.

Steeves pales, heart bumping against his chest.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

He said you were relieved as an  
instructor and reassigned as  
adjutant of a maintenance squad  
after certain incendiary remarks  
were made about the Air Force.  
Weeks before you went off the grid.

Blair lets this linger a moment as Steeves sweats.

STEEVES

Webber's not a source you should be trusting.

Blair picks up a burnt stick, then tosses it aside.

BLAIR

Well, not much else out here for us to find. Unless we happen upon your jet. Where do you think it's gone to anyway?

Steeves steps closer to Blair, his knuckles white.

STEEVES

(bristles)

Ever since we started out, you've had this tone. Like you've got something to say, but for some reason, you're not saying it.

Gene braces to rush in.

RITA

David.

Steeves turns to Rita. Seeing her concern, he calms himself.

STEEVES

That T-33 flew over my head at 455 miles an hour, heading southeast with a busted fuselage. There's absolutely no way for me to know what happened after I deployed from a malfunctioning jet, Mr Blair.

Blair stands his ground, unperturbed.

BLAIR

I'm sure we'll have the answer soon enough.

He snaps another photo of the roots as Steeves watches on, considering what else the journalist knows about him.

**EXT. KING'S CANYON NATIONAL PARK - LATER**

The ambient sounds of the forest crescendo as the four ride their donkeys back, lost in thought.

**EXT. RANGER'S STATION - KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARK - DUSK**

The group returns to find a RED SEDAN parked in the lot.

Steeves recognizes the car, but none of the others do. He dismounts his donkey and ties her to a post with urgency.

He hurries into the station, ahead of the group, cursing under his breath. Rita notes his odd behavior and follows.

Blair and Gene hang back, taking their time tying up their donkeys, trading glances.

**INT. RANGER'S STATION - CONTINUOUS**

Steeves walks a few steps inside. Looks around, frantic.

SCRAPPY

You have a visitor.

LAURA MILLER, 23, styled red hair, green eyes, eagerly steps into the room from the hallway.

LAURA

Hi, David.

STEEVES

I told you the hotel lobby.

Laura stands in the middle of the room, vulnerable. Steeves doesn't move to greet her.

LAURA

I couldn't wait.

Rita enters the room behind him. He turns to her, then back to Laura, heavy silence hanging in the air.

**INT. BREAK ROOM - RANGER'S STATION - MOMENTS LATER**

Rita, Steeves and Laura are seated around a small table.

STEEVES

I asked Laura to come so you could meet... and know we're through.

Rita tenses. Laura looks surprised. Saddened. Apparently she was unaware of Steeves' intentions for her trip.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

Laura. Please tell her it's over.

Laura clenches her jaw.

**INT. LOBBY - CONTINUOUS**

Blair steps inside and approaches Scrappy.

SCRAPPY  
Hate to be in the middle of that.

Blair adjusts his angle to see Laura.

BLAIR  
Who is she?

Scrappy gives him a look like "put it together yourself."

**INT. BREAK ROOM - SIMULTANEOUS**

Rita shields tears with trembling hands.

RITA  
...are you incapable of thinking?

STEEVES  
I only ever think of us-- why else  
would she be here?

Laura laughs in disbelief.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
Tell her it's over. Please.

LAURA  
It is over, David. You get what you  
want. Again.  
(to Rita)  
I'm sorry, honey. All this time I  
convinced myself he was worth the  
heartache. He's not worth a damn.

Laura storms out. Steeves watches her go; the scope of what he's done finally sinking in.

STEEVES  
This is the only way you'd know for  
certain.

Steeves touches his wife's hand. Then goes after Laura. Trying to fix a situation that simply cannot be fixed.

We stay with Rita. Her eyes freezing over. The last hint of love for her husband flickers out before our eyes.

**EXT. RANGER'S STATION - CONTINUOUS**

Steeves barrels through the door. He hurries after Laura as she huffs off to her sedan.

We stay with Blair who clandestinely steps out to watch the scene unfold. Gene appears by his side holding his own camera. He snaps a photo of Steeves and Laura mid-dispute.

**INT. BEN HIBBS' OFFICE - SATURDAY EVENING POST - DAY**

Blair stands before Ben, working himself up.

BLAIR

...the guy's a phony-- a con-man.  
It's all smoke and mirrors.

Ben's eyes flit to the open door.

BEN

Shut the door.

BLAIR

(ignoring the request)  
We're not paying him a dime, Ben.

Ben gets up and shuts the door himself.

BEN

A liar and a cheat can still pull  
himself out of the wild.

Blair produces a series of PHOTOS from the Sierras, spreading them out all over Ben's desk.

BLAIR

It's not a question of whether  
Steeves was in the Sierras-- *how*  
and *why* he ended up there is what  
we need to be asking.

Ben sifts through a few of the photos.

BEN

What reason would the Lieutenant  
possibly have for perpetuating a  
hoax on a national scale?

BLAIR

He needs some way of explaining why  
his jet is gone. Who's going to  
argue with a hero.

Ben looks up from a photo, unsettled.

BEN

Let me stop you right there. We're not pulling the exclusive. We would never survive that kind of fallout with Curtis.

BLAIR

Well then we're at an impasse, Ben, cause I'm sure as hell not putting my byline above the words of a traitor.

BEN

Traitor? Jesus Christ...

Blair lets it sink in.

BEN (CONT'D)

You think he's a closet pinko? That he, what-- sold his jet to the Soviets then sold *us* a narrative?

BLAIR

I think we gotta pull the plug.

Blair straightens his stance.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

There's no easy way around it. We can't be caught paying a guy we know at the very least is peddling lies. We need to kill the story, and make that known to the public.

BEN

This isn't coming out of spite?

The question catches Blair off guard. He raises a brow.

BEN (CONT'D)

You trusted Steeves. And now it seems you may have been duped. What's worse, he nearly conned you into duping the nation. The very nation you laid your life on the line to defend.

(beat)

If it's true-- it's treason. But it also may be personal for you-- humiliation has a funny way of clouding even the most straight-up man's judgment.

BLAIR  
 Why'd you bring me on if you think  
 I'm that much of a hack?

BEN  
 Act rashly, and you may do  
 something we can't come back from.

Blair looks him in the eye, surprised.

BLAIR  
 So it's my decision?

Ben's silence confirms it is.

**INT. BLAIR'S OFFICE - SATURDAY EVENING POST - LATER**

Blair sits at his desk with his back to an open door. Several REPORTERS peer in from the bullpen.

BLAIR  
 This is a courtesy call, Officer.  
 Not a consultation.

**INT. MCGINNIS' OFFICE - CASTLE AIR BASE - SIMULTANEOUS**

Officer McGinnis paces nervously, on the call.

MCGINNIS  
 Do you think we'd ever put a  
 traitor on the national stage?

BLAIR  
 Honestly, I'm not sure you bothered  
 to check.

MCGINNIS  
 Let us handle this.

BLAIR  
 I'm not standing in your way.

MCGINNIS  
 (panicking)  
 This line between us will be cut--  
 forever. Do not do this, Mr. Blair.

BLAIR  
 It's already done.

Blair hangs up. McGinnis SLAMS his phone down on the receiver.

**INT. WAREHOUSE - REPUBLIC AVIATION - LONG ISLAND, NY - DAY**

SPARKS shower down from the wing of an F-105 Thunderchief, a sleek, new model fighter jet, about to join the fleet.

A WELDER stands at the top of a ladder, modifying an external hard point. Metal SHRIEKS, echoing off the high ceilings.

General LeMay stands at a distance, hands behind his back. Officer McGinnis approaches, guided by a SECURITY OFFICER.

His hand trembles as he fights to stand tall.

MCGINNIS

Sir. The Post... they're pulling the exclusive.

Lemay turns red with anger. But not surprise.

MCGINNIS (CONT'D)

You see, there were some discrepancies in his story--

LEMAY

Put out a statement that the OSI is investigating his disappearance.

A long pause as McGinnis' world flips.

MCGINNIS

I had no idea, Sir.

LEMAY

Yeah, no shit. Now you're going to undo all you've done, before we act on a mountain of intelligence your department somehow overlooked.

McGinnis pales.

MCGINNIS

It's true then. He's a communist.

LeMay keeps his steely stature. The Security Officer approaches.

SECURITY OFFICER

General. I have President Eisenhower on the line.

Fear flashes in Lemay's eyes as he leaves McGinnis staring at the SPARKS flying off the jet like fireworks.

**INT. KITCHEN - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - DAY**

Rita prepares a sandwich for Steeves who sits at the table, drinking a beer and browsing the classified section.

Leisa plays with a doll at his feet, gazing up at her dad, longing for him to join. Steeves fails to notice.

Rita drops the plate on the table, carrying on into the next room. Steeves looks up momentarily from the paper, shaking his head at his wife's cold shoulder.

LEISA

Daddy...

Steeves answers from behind the paper.

STEEVES

Yeah, honey?

LEISA

How come you lied?

Steeves sets the paper down. She has his attention.

STEEVES

What'd you say?

LEISA

Mommy told Grandma you lied.

STEEVES

About what?

Leisa shrugs.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

(unnerved)

Well, she's wrong.

Leisa returns to her doll.

LEISA

(sotto)

Mommy's never wrong.

Steeves prepares a rebuttal, but swallows it. Watching his daughter bounce her doll, he downs the last of his beer.

**HALLWAY**

Sifting through the mail, Rita comes across a letter from the Saturday Evening Post. It's an official document typed on the Post's stationary.

RITA  
(calling out)  
David.

**EXT. THE SATURDAY EVENING POST - DAY**

A small press conference; a DOZEN REPORTERS in formation around Blair.

BLAIR  
The Saturday Evening Post has decided to pull the exclusive with Lieutenant David Steeves due to certain discrepancies found in his account of survival. We are a publication that values integrity and we will not compromise our ethics for any story. That is all we'll say on the matter.

Blair turns his back and walks back into the building as the reporters flood him with unanswered questions.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - DAY**

Steeves paces-- on a call.

STEEVES  
You tell him to return my call as soon as possible.

Steeves hangs up, exasperated. A knock at the door draws his attention.

Steeves peels back the window blinds to find: Buicks and Chevys parked on the curb. Additional REPORTERS exiting their cars, approaching the house...

RITA  
Don't answer it.

Steeves ignores Rita. He crosses to the door and opens it.

We recognize familiar faces. Reporters that laughed, joked and pat Steeves on the back when he was an undisputed hero--

Now they've come with pitchforks.

REPORTER #1  
Lieutenant. Why is the Post pulling your exclusive?

# Post Kills Story of Lost Airman

WASHINGTON (AP)—The Air Force said Tuesday that it is making a "thorough but routine" investigation of Lt. David Steeves' disappearance for 54 days in California's High Sierras.

\* \* \* \*

MEANWHILE, in Philadelphia, a spokesman for The Saturday Evening Post said the magazine has cancelled plans to publish a story on Steeves' reported experience. This was done, the spokesman said, because of what The Post considered discrepancies in Steeves' story.

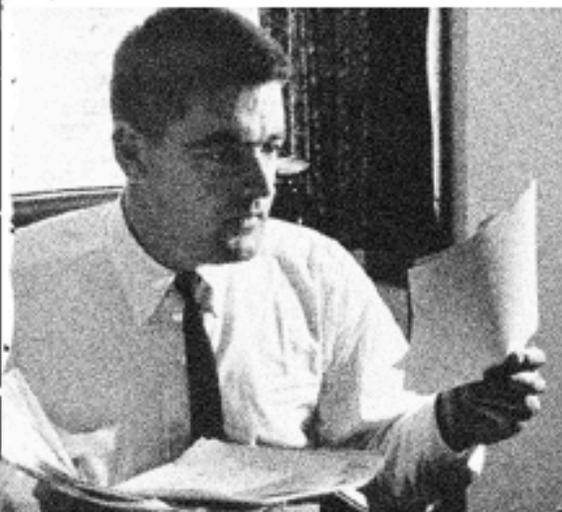
The spokesman said that on July 9, the magazine contracted for a story but terminated the agreement Aug. 6 after three weeks of investigation.

He related that Clay Blair Jr., who was to write the story, went out to the Sierras, returned with Steeves to the cabin where Steeves said he survived for three weeks and interviewed Steeves at great length. Blair reported that he had detected numerous discrepancies in Steeves' story."

The 23-year-old pilot is now temporarily assigned at Boling Air Force Base, near here, while Air Force experts check the story he told after emerging from the wilderness in June. Steeves bailed out of his jet trainer over the mountains on a routine flight. The Air Force listed him as officially dead, but 54 days later he stumbled out of



LT. STEEVES  
"Shook Me Hard"



The Air Force had planned

STEEVES

I have no idea.

REPORTER #2

What 'discrepancies' did they uncover?

STEEVES

I've told my story a hundred times before and it hasn't changed.

REPORTER #1

Do you have any idea why Mr. Blair might think otherwise?

As the cluster of reporters grows into a herd, Steeves wakes to the enormity of the situation...

**VARIOUS SHOTS OF THE NATION RESPONDING:**

-A bundle of newspapers snipped by a blade. Front page of the Bridgeport Press reveals: POST KILLS STORY OF LOST AIRMAN.

-A newsstand in Times Square. NEW YORKERS flock, stopping to examine Steeves' face under the headline: HERO OR HOAXER?

-PARK RANGERS in Cedar Grove DEBATE at the card table, gesticulating wildly over a splayed newspaper.

-A reporter asks an Officer McGinnis to comment on Steeves during a press conference. "Our Office of Special Investigations is looking into it."

-Newsreel spins black and white footage of Steeves shortly after his return from the wild. Now with ominous music and a suspicious voice over relaying the newest developments. PATRONS in the packed theater watch the scandal unfold.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - DAY**

Steeves' entire FAMILY gathers in the room, discussing the situation in hushed conversations. The scandal is starting to fracture their family.

Steeves speaks privately with his friend, Al.

AL

Have they asked about me?

Al's wipes away a bead of sweat on his forehead.

STEEVES

No.

AL  
Nothing about our detailing shop?

Steeves has much bigger fish to fry. But eases Al's mind nonetheless.

STEEVES  
I haven't said a word.

AL  
Oh, thank Christ.

Al puts his arm on Steeves' shoulder.

AL (CONT'D)  
If you can, buddy. Leave me out of it, okay?

Rita escorts three OFFICERS of the Office of Special Investigation into the living room.

Al sees them, and spooks. He wanders off into another room, leaving Steeves there, standing alone, staring at his wife.

OSI OFFICER  
Thank you, Ma'am.

The thick, linebacker of an Officer brandishes a badge.

OFFICER BROOKS  
Lieutenant Steeves. We're with the Office of Special Investigation. I'm Officer Brooks.

STEEVES  
Okay.

OFFICER BROOKS  
We're closing our accident report and have a couple questions we'd like to ask. Can we have you come with us?

STEEVES  
Ask me what you want to know; I have nothing to hide.

Steeves' family members quiet down, stealing glances.

OFFICER BROOKS  
It's best if we speak in private.

STEEVES

If I get in the car with you, it will look like I've done something wrong.

OFFICER BROOKS

This is all very routine, Lieutenant.

Steeves scoffs. Opens the window blinds.

STEEVES

Why don't you tell that to them.

**EXT. RITA'S FAMILY HOME - DAY**

The OSI ushers Steeves through the mob, cutting through a volley of FLASHING BULBS and onslaught of QUESTIONS.

CUT TO:

**EXT. BASIN - SIERRAS - DAWN - FLASHBACK**

*Towering SNOW-CLAD MOUNTAINS bathe in the soft light of dawn. Clouds nestled in their crevices. Snow caught in the breeze.*

*A fallen 10 foot dwarf pine is wedged against another. A PARACHUTE splayed at their roots, barely visible under a fresh sheet of snow.*

*Movement from underneath, then suddenly, the chute is tugged from the center; YANKED down into a hole in the earth.*

*Steeves pops his head out of the cave, surprised to be alive. His face is round, healthy; barely any facial hair.*

*He army-crawls out. Staggeres to his feet. Squinting, he takes in the wild. The dense crop of trees ahead, the rocky inclines beyond. No path in sight.*

*Steeves takes a step toward his parachute-- SHRIEKS in pain, falling backward on his ass.*

*He grabs at his right ankle. Peeling back his pant leg to find RED SKIN, swollen and tender.*

*He exposes his left ankle. BUSTED just as bad.*

STEEVES

Christ.

**EXT. BASIN - MORNING**

*HUFFING*, Steeves crawls on his belly with a rock in hand, elbow over elbow.

Reaching a rock pile, he adds the stone in his hand, then drags himself over to his dwarf pine shelter.

He leans against a tree, taking in the SOS of rocks and sticks he's built in the clearing. His body's tracks veer in all directions, been at this for hours.

**DUSK**

Steeves' back against the pine, bundled in his parachute.

He wears his crash helmet and a thousand mile stare. Unconcerned about the snowfall, or unaware of it.

SNOWFLAKES breeze over him, sticking to his thin layer of facial hair; clouds low enough to hug the trees.

Several feet away, his SOS vanishes beneath the snowfall.

**INT. SNOW CAVE - NIGHT**

FLAMES barely illuminate the walls of the cave.

Steeves trembles, holding the photo of the woman and the girl on his chest that rises and falls with each shivering breath.

**EXT. BASIN - MORNING**

Steeves sets his eyes on a grove of trees fifty yards away.

His feet are inexplicably BURIED IN SNOW MOUNDS. Boots and wool socks strewn beside them.

He eases his feet out of the snow. Grabs his bloated right foot and pivots, testing for pain. Nothing. Completely numb.

Steeves pulls socks on. Hurriedly loads his feet into boots.

He grabs hold of a branch he's cut into a walking stick. Wraps a strip of cut parachute around it, securing his hand to the pine.

He DIGS his boots into ice. Prepares for pain. Using the stick and the pine tree behind him, he RISES.

Face flush from held breath, Steeves plants the stick a foot ahead, then drags his boot behind. Feeling nothing, he takes another step. And now he's walking.

STEEVES

YAW!

*Steeves continues his paraplegic trek across the basin, leaving his parachute and crash helmet behind.*

*A RED-TAIL HAWK circles high above, silhouetted against the sunrise. From the hawk's POV: Steeves is a distant star in a teeming galaxy. Barely visible. Terrifyingly insignificant.*

**EXT. WILDERNESS - DAWN**

*Steeves squats by a tree, attempting to shit. It's a clear day. Blue skies. He starts singing--*

TRANSITION TO:

**INT. OFFICE - AIR FORCE BASE**

*Steeves sits across a table from Officer Brooks. Florescent lights paint the white plaster walls a sickly yellow.*

OFFICER BROOKS

You radioed in your position over Fresno at 11:12. That was the last we heard from you.

STEEVES

Right, minutes later my fuselage exploded.

OFFICER BROOKS

You were en route from Oakland Municipal-- Pacific to your right-- heading south.

*Steeves rubs his face, tired-- annoyed.*

STEEVES

Selma is south of Oakland, correct.

OFFICER BROOKS

Is it true you traveled to Mexico on April 24, 1955?

*This takes Steeves by surprise-- he straightens up.*

STEEVES

I took my buddy for his birthday. We had some menudo at El Compadre. You want to write that one down?

Brooks looks up from his papers. Stern and unsmiling.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
Yes, I went to Mexico.

**INT. INFIRMARY - AIR FORCE BASE**

Steeves is poked and prodded by a FLIGHT SURGEON. Noticeable difference in this medic's demeanor, compared to the first.

He runs through the same examination but this time with suspicion, like a detective dusting for prints.

**INT. OFFICE - AIR FORCE BASE**

OFFICER BROOKS  
In what city did this jaunt take place?

STEEVES  
Nogales.

OFFICER BROOKS  
Not much of a vacation destination. Why not Tijuana, or Rosarito?

STEEVES  
Closer drive.

OFFICER BROOKS  
Are you aware that Nogales is the sight of a communications tower, bought and paid for by the Soviets to pick up signals across the border?

STEEVES  
No.

OFFICER BROOKS  
You didn't happen to make any new friends in Nogales?

Steeves is incredulous.

STEEVES  
What is this-- I mean, what am I being accused of exactly?

OFFICER BROOKS  
I'm simply asking questions.

STEEVES

We spent a week's salary on  
tequila, overtipped the mariachi  
band, and I reported for duty on  
time and ready for PT as soon as my  
leave was up.

Brooks makes note. Moves on.

**INT. EXAMINATION ROOM - AIR FORCE BASE**

A PSYCHOLOGIST holds up a Rorschach test to Steeves.

PSYCHOLOGIST

What do you see here?

Steeves studies it. Exasperated with the exercise.

STEEVES

A shrink holding a black smudge.  
What the hell do you see?

Off the psychologist's stoic face, writing on his pad--

**INT. OFFICE - AIR FORCE BASE**

OFFICER BROOKS

A fire was reported in Kings  
Canyon, fairly close to a site you  
claimed to have passed through.  
What can you tell me about it?

Steeves swallows; sweat peppers his brow.

STEEVES

I never saw a fire.

Officer Brooks checks a box, and takes a sip of water;  
suspiciously accepting of Steeves' answer.

**INT. BLAIR'S OFFICE - THE SATURDAY EVENING POST - DAY**

Blair's typewriter has shifted across his desk to make room  
for his feet. He reclines with today's Washington Post,  
headline reading "DISCREPANCY FOUND IN LOST FLYER'S STORY."

A knock on the door. His SECRETARY pops her head in.

SECRETARY

I have a Robert Corrigan from  
Northwestern Mutual on the line.

BLAIR

Tell him I'm not interested.

SECRETARY

It's the fifth time he's called  
this week. You were on the road.

The secretary crosses the room and drops five MESSAGE SLIPS  
on Blair's desk with his name, number, and time of call.

BLAIR

(under breath)

Goddamn insurance salesmen.

SECRETARY

He said it's not a sales call.  
Sounds pretty urgent.

Blair looks up, curious.

BLAIR

Put him through.

He takes his feet down, and answers the ringing call.

BLAIR (ON PHONE) (CONT'D)

Clay Blair Jr. Saturday Evening  
Post.

ROBERT CORRIGAN (ON PHONE)

(over-excited)

Mr. Blair. Thank you for taking my  
call. Your flier... Lieutenant  
Steeves. I've been reading about  
him in the papers.

BLAIR

(impatient)

You and the rest of the country.

ROBERT CORRIGAN (ON PHONE)

Yes, yes. But did the rest of the  
country sell the Lieutenant a life  
insurance policy?

BLAIR

(curious)

When?

ROBERT CORRIGAN (ON PHONE)

Month before he went off the grid.

Blair's eyes go wide.

ROBERT CORRIGAN (ON PHONE) (CONT'D)  
 Up-sold him a hefty package. But  
 I'll say-- he wasn't all that hard  
 to convince.

(beat)  
 Didn't think anything of it, until  
 the rumblings started. Thought you  
 should know.

BLAIR  
 Thank you Mr. Corrigan.

ROBERT CORRIGAN (ON PHONE)  
 Can't hardly sleep at night knowing  
 I mighta done business with a  
 commie. Shit, I pat the man on his  
 back and shook his goddamn hand.

Blair stares off, no doubt thinking the same.

**EXT. PARKING LOT - GROCERY STORE - DAY**

Rita pushes Leisa in a cart full of groceries. Leisa spreads  
 her arms wide-- pretending that she's flying.

LEISA  
 I'm flying, just like Daddy!

Rita smiles solemnly. She fishes for keys as she nears her  
 car. A SUITED MAN steps out of his sedan, approaches.

SUITED MAN  
 Need a hand?

Rita, startled. Smiles politely.

RITA  
 I can manage.

SUITED MAN  
 Say, I recognize you.

Rita's smile disappears. She ignores him, opens the trunk.

SUITED MAN (CONT'D)  
 You're that airman's wife.

Rita places Leisa into the back seat.

SUITED MAN (CONT'D)

He ain't really a pinko, is he? Me myself, don't believe the chatter, but these days, can't be too careful. Here, let me help you--

He steps forward to help Rita with the groceries and Rita slaps him flat across the face. So sudden she's even surprised herself.

SUITED MAN (CONT'D)

Jesus, lady!

RITA

Please. Just let us be.

Rita slams the trunk, leaving half her groceries in the cart and hustles into her car. Drives off in a huff.

**INT. OFFICE - AIR BASE - LATER**

Steeves is alone in the room now. No windows. No clock.

The walls-- and his demons-- closing in.

A transcript of his original statement sits on the desk. A red pen beside it. The implication: *amend the accident report*. He paces-- angered by the audacity of the exercise.

He goes for the door. It's locked. He knocks. No answer.

STEEVES

Hey!

He rattles the handle.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

I'm done in here.

No response. Seething, Steeves kicks the door and then takes a seat to compose himself. For a moment, it seems he has...

Until, abruptly, he stands and FLIPS THE TABLE OVER. He charges the door. POUNDS ON IT.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

Tell me what I did! Someone tell me what the fuck you think I did!

**EXT. RITA'S FAMILY HOME - FAIRFIELD, CT - DUSK**

Leisa sleeps in Rita's lap, clinging to her mother.

RITA

What am I supposed to do?

Rita's mother, Esther, sits close by. We hear VOICES outside the front door. Headlights slant through the blinds.

RITA (CONT'D)

I can't continue on like this.

Esther touches her daughter's trembling hand. Considering...

ESTHER

Maybe it's time you spoke your mind.

RITA

I don't know when I'll see him next. I don't even know where he is...

ESTHER

Not to David, honey. To the press.

Rita strokes her daughter's twitching face, calming Leisa from a bad dream. Her own nerves frayed beyond repair.

**INT. OFFICE - AIR FORCE BASE - DUSK**

Steeves sits alone in the corner of the room. Disheveled and silent. Hugging his knees. Brooks enters. He glances at the upturned table-- decides to let it be.

OFFICER BROOKS

Lieutenant. I'm happy to report that our investigation has concluded. You're free to go.

But Brooks looks anything but happy. Steeves shakes his head, and laughs to himself.

STEEVES

You know, you actually had me wondering for a second-- if I could possibly have done something wrong.

(beat)

I've given my life to the Air Force and how do you repay me? Lock me in a room for twelve goddamn hours and make me question my own sanity.

Officer Brooks ignores him.

OFFICER BROOKS  
 We've arranged for a car to take  
 you to the airport. If you'll  
 follow me...

Officer Brooks opens the door wide for Steeves to exit.

**INT. HALLWAY - CASTLE AIR FORCE BASE - DAY**

Brooks escorts Steeves down a narrow hallway.

Officer McGinnis and other OFFICIALS walk out of a meeting. McGinnis locks eyes with Steeves momentarily before averting his gaze and shifting to get by him.

Steeves watches McGinnis over his shoulder, waiting for some acknowledgement that doesn't come. McGinnis never looks back.

**INT. TAXI CAB - FAIRFIELD, CT. - NIGHT**

Steeves sits in back of a cab. He catches the DRIVER eyeing him in the rearview.

They pull into a cul-de-sac, swarming with REPORTERS.

STEEVES  
 Shit. Stop... Stop!

The car comes to an abrupt HALT. Steeves tosses a few dollars in the front passenger seat and jumps out.

**EXT. RITA'S FAMILY HOME - MOMENTS LATER**

Steeves sneaks around the house. Enters through the backyard.

**INT. KITCHEN - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - SIMULTANEOUS**

Rita is on a call with a Reporter. A tabloid lays open on the kitchen table. On the cover, a picture of Laura Miller and Steeves outside Cedar Grove Ranger Station under the headline: "LIEUTENANT'S MISTRESS SPEAKS OUT."

RITA (ON PHONE)  
 When something happens on a  
 national scale like this people  
 have to play their roles.

Steeves enters quietly through the back door.

RITA (ON PHONE) (CONT'D)  
 No this is not at all connected to  
 the recent developments. It started  
 long before all this publicity--

She turns, startled to see her husband in her house.

RITA (ON PHONE) (CONT'D)  
 (rushed)  
 I have to go.

She hangs up. An awkward beat.

STEEVES  
 You're letting them into our lives,  
 Rita. Too close.

RITA  
 What choice do I have? I haven't  
 slept in a week. I need to separate  
 from this.

STEEVES  
 You mean from me.

RITA  
 A long time ago, we were good--  
 really, truly, good together. But I  
 don't know who you are anymore.  
 (beat)  
 And you certainly haven't bothered  
 to ask who I am.  
 (beat)  
 Who are we pretending to be, David?  
 And for what?

This hits Steeves hard.

STEEVES  
 I swore I'd never lie to you again  
 and I've kept that promise since  
 the day I walked out of those woods  
 alive. What more do you want from  
 me?

Rita looks into his eyes for a long moment. Courage welling  
 up alongside her tears.

RITA  
 I want a divorce, David.

Steeves' blanches, his knees nearly buckling. Devastated.

Leisa appears at the top of the stairs with tired eyes. Upon seeing her father, she stirs awake, bounds down the stairs.

LEISA

Daddy!

She runs to her father as Rita escapes into the backyard.

**EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS**

Rita shuts the door behind her, fighting back tears. She breathes. Gathers herself. Then finally, walks back inside.

**INT. KITCHEN - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - CONTINUOUS**

Rita walks through the kitchen to the living room.

David and Leisa are gone.

RITA

Leisa?

She yells upstairs.

RITA (CONT'D)

Leisa!

No response. Deafening silence. Rita runs to the window and throws open the blinds. The driveway is empty.

CUT TO:

*A MATCH STRIKES A FLAME.*

**EXT. GOD KNOWS WHERE - DEAD OF NIGHT**

*The flame flickers and settles, barely illuminating a barren, bone-white SNOW CAVE.*

*STEEVES' terrified face drops into frame.*

*Dizzy with claustrophobia; stiff with shock; freezing his fucking balls off; a look of terror sharply contrasting his clean-shaven, all-American build. First night in the wild.*

*He lowers the match to a pile of wood shavings.*

*BLUE LIPS blow on mars red kindling; quivering and crackling. Tiny flames animate, the wood catching fire.*

*Steeves empties the contents of his BILLFOLD into his lap. He feeds his Air Force ID to the fire; identity reduced to fuel.*

*He fingers a ONE DOLLAR BILL, trembling as he lights the corner-- then watches the flame march across the bill, devouring "IN GOD WE TRUST."*

*One item remains: the picture of Rita and Leisa.*

*Steeves holds the photo over the flames, illuminating the portrait. The flames lurch, but Steeves pulls back.*

*He folds the photo in half, then tucks it into his breast pocket above the heart.*

*Steeves reaches behind him, producing a CRASH-HELMET. He straps it beneath his chin for added warmth.*

*He curls around the flames like a half-moon, hanging onto life through violent shivers. The world outside WHISTLES and HOWLS, relentless and portentous.*

*For the first time Steeves is forced to look inward. He's not an introspective man, and the feeling is bitter as the cold.*

*He lowers the sun visor on the helmet and settles in. Tiny flames reflecting off black tempered glass.*

**EXT. BASIN - SIERRAS - DAWN**

*Towering SNOW-CLAD MOUNTAINS bathe in the soft light of dawn. Clouds nestled in their crevices. Snow caught in the breeze.*

*Movement from underneath, then suddenly, the chute is tugged from the center; YANKED down into a hole in the earth--*

TRANSITION TO:

**INT. JAGUAR - CONTINUOUS**

*Steeves races down the road with Leisa in the passenger seat. No car seat. No seat belt. He's taking sharp bends at break-neck speed.*

*Leisa looks up at him-- innocent confusion melting into fear.*

**INT. KITCHEN - HARRY'S HOME - NIGHT**

*Steeves sets Leisa down on the linoleum, tears in her eyes.*

Harry enters with a baseball bat at his side, responding to a noise in the middle of the night. He rubs his eyes.

STEEVES

Just for a few days.

Steeves trembles with adrenaline. Harry notes the despair in his voice, in his pleading stance. Without question--

HARRY

As long as you need.

**INT. CHILDREN'S ROOM - HARRY'S HOME - MORNING**

Steeves sleeps on the floor beside a child's bed.

A knock rattles him awake. He looks up through bleary eyes to find his brother in the doorway, holding a cup of coffee.

HARRY

Scrambled or sunny-side-up?

Steeves wipes his eyes.

STEEVES

Whatever I tell you, the opposite is true.

**INT. KITCHEN - HARRY'S HOME - DAY**

Steeves shuffles in. Harry's wife, RUTH, reads the local edition at the kitchen table. On the cover-- Steeves troubled face. He catches a glimpse of the headline:

"AIR FORCE PROBING LIEUTENANT'S STORY." She sets down the paper, embarrassed to be caught reading about the scandal.

RUTH

Oh, David.

She stands. Hugs him.

Steeves takes a seat next to his six-year-old nephew, BOBBY, playing airplanes with Leisa.

LEISA

Look what cousin Bobby has.

RUTH

He wants to be a pilot. Just like his Uncle.

Bobby sets the jet down, shy from the attention. Steeves picks it up and examines the components.

STEEVES

This is a dual-engine. Know how fast she can fly?

Bobby shakes his head "no."

STEEVES (CONT'D)

Over four-hundred miles an hour. Could take you from your house to school like this--

Steeves SNAPS his fingers. Bobby's eyes open wide. Steeves hands back the plane. Bobby inspects the engine, mystified.

RUTH

Way the world's going-- I should've bought him a postal truck.

Steeves' eyes fall on the paper. He can't help himself.

STEEVES

(to Ruth)

What's it say?

RUTH

Doesn't matter. It's all speculation.

STEEVES

What are they speculating?

Ruth, uncomfortable. But there's part of her that's morbidly curious about this.

RUTH

...that you sold your jet.

HARRY

Ruth.

RUTH

It's not what I believe, of course. Who would you even sell it to?

STEEVES

The Soviets.

Ruth and Harry stare, stunned by his matter-of-fact tone.

Steeves leans back in his chair. He looks around at what his life has become. Run out of his own home. Taken up the life of a refugee.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
I'm going to have a smoke.

He stands and grabs a Budweiser out of the Frigidaire on his way out. Ruth looks at Harry, concerned.

**EXT. PORCH - HARRY'S RESIDENCE - MOMENTS LATER**

Steeves throws back the last of his beer. Tries to light his tobacco pipe, but the Zippo's out of fluid. So he tosses it.

His brother joins him on the porch.

HARRY  
She doesn't believe it, Dave. None of us do.

STEEVES  
First they implied it was a hoax. Now they call me a traitor.

HARRY  
Nobody's saying--

STEEVES  
I'm just supposed to hang out to dry while strangers make up their minds about me?

HARRY  
No. You go back to your job. You keep your head up and your mouth shut. You ignore the press and take care of your family.

STEEVES  
Rita will never take me back like this. And Leisa... What'll she grow up thinking?  
(beat)  
I'll never have this-- what you've got here.

Harry pauses, knowing that to be true. He searches for the right words but they're nowhere to be found.

A look of determination grows in Steeves' eye.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
I'm pushing back, Harry. There's no other way.

**EXT. HARRY'S HOME - EVENING**

Steeves stands on the front lawn; a group of REPORTERS hover.

STEEVES  
Mr. Blair and the editors of the Saturday Evening Post have claimed that my account of survival has apparent 'discrepancies.' Well, what are those discrepancies exactly? I challenge the Post to come forward with any sort of evidence suggesting my account of survival is not the whole truth...

A flurry of QUESTIONS and FLASHING BULBS.

**INT. BLAIR'S OFFICE - THE SATURDAY EVENING POST - DAY**

A knock on the door. Blair doesn't respond, typing away on a new story. DENNIS, appears in the doorway.

DENNIS  
You should come read this.

BLAIR  
(to Dennis)  
I'm busy.

Dennis holds up a paper with a shit-eating grin.

DENNIS  
Your Lieutenant's firing back.

The headline: "FLIER STICKS TO HIS STORY; ACCUSES THE POST OF MISCONDUCT."

Blair's face sets like a rock.

**INT. BEN HIBBS' OFFICE - SATURDAY EVENING POST - DAY**

Blair enters, closes the door quietly behind him.

Ben Hibbs drops his newspaper, and with it, all of his practiced civility.

BEN

This thing isn't gonna just drift away and leave you be-- reporters will come after you, Blair. Investigate your investigation. Dig in to find out what you know. You're becoming the subject of your own story; a serious liability to our publisher. Which makes you a serious liability to me.

Blair doesn't counter, knowing this to be true.

BLAIR

What do you want me to do?

BEN

If we're not going to publish the story, the public's got to know why.

Blair shifts uncomfortable in his seat.

BEN (CONT'D)

All the discrepancies you presented me-- feed it to other outlets.

Blair shakes his head.

BLAIR

Unless his jet is found in some warehouse behind the Iron Curtain we won't have the hard evidence to attack more than his character--

BEN

(exasperated)

Lieutenant David Steeves is either a hero or a traitor. Make up your mind, Blair-- WHAT'S THE GODDAMN HEADLINE?

**INT. KITCHEN - CONDO - WASHINGTON, DC - NIGHT**

Blair sits in silence at the dinner table with Agnes and Kemp, mulling over his situation.

AGNES

Why don't you tell your father what happened today?

Kemp keeps his eyes on the flicking television; "Invasion of the Bodysnatchers" plays in the living room.

KEMP

I, uh...

AGNES

The book report.

KEMP

I got an 'A' on my report.

AGNES

And what book?

KEMP

'The Boys Book of Jets.'

A BLINDING WHITE LIGHT FLASHES, then the power dies, plunging the family into darkness. Kemp yelps as chairs screech against the linoleum-- rapid movement throughout the room.

BLAIR

It's alright.

Blair switches on a flashlight, near the window. He pulls back the curtain, and peers outside.

BLAIR (CONT'D)

Transformer blew.

He swings the flashlight to find his son huddled beneath the table in a 'duck and cover' position, trembling. Agnes crouched beside him, touching his back soothingly.

AGNES

We're okay, baby.

Blair keeps the light on his family, absorbing the depth of their fear.

BLAIR

Come on out, Kemp. Just an outage.

But Kemp doesn't move. He's trembling. Blair walks to the table, crouches, then slides under and sits next his wife and son in the dark. He places his hand on Kemp's head, trying to allay his family's fears as much as his own.

**EXT. THE SATURDAY EVENING POST - DAY**

Blair stands before a large crowd of reporters.

BLAIR

It was not in our interest to spell out the discrepancies found in Lieutenant Steeves' account of survival. We thought it unnecessary - malicious even.

(long pause)

However, recent actions taken by the Lieutenant have provoked a response...

**INT. KITCHEN - HARRY'S HOME - DAY**

Ruth peaks through the blinds, eyeing the reporters on their front lawn.

RUTH

They could at least pick the weeds.

Ruth turns to Harry and Steeves, each reading different sections of the paper.

HARRY

The timing doesn't look good.

Steeves hits the paper against the table in frustration.

STEEVES

The Air Force pulled its free life insurance program.

(beat)

Sutton went down, and his family got nothing. Of course I bought my own policy. It was the responsible thing to do.

Harry shakes his head sympathetically.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

Blair has nothing solid beyond the fire. I'll admit to starting it, then it all falls apart for him.

Ruth and Harry exchange a nervous look.

HARRY

Did you start it?

Steeves keeps his head buried in the paper.

STEEVES

Sure. To attract attention.

Harry and Ruth share a troubled look.

HARRY

Why haven't you told anyone?

STEEVES

They were calling me a hero. Air Force wanted me to look the part. Well, heroes don't start fires.

HARRY

Dave. How are you going to convince the press that's all you haven't told them... I mean, is there anything else we don't know?

Steeves sets the paper down. Eyes Ruth and Harry.

STEEVES

How am I supposed to 'keep my head up' when even my own brother's convinced I'm a liar.

HARRY

That's not fair.

Steeves stands, working himself into a frenzy.

STEEVES

I need the public support of the Air Force. Right now, my word doesn't seem to mean much to anybody.

Steeves' eyes are dark and baggy. His hair scraggly. Not since the Sierras has he looked so lost and disturbed.

HARRY

Why don't you take a breather.

STEEVES

Will you watch Leisa? I'll be gone a few days.

Harry weighs his options. He has no other choice.

**INT. LOBBY - PENTAGON - DAY**

Steeves' wears a pressed military uniform. With a clean shave, he looks younger, vulnerable. Innocent even.

RECEPTIONIST

Lieutenant.

Steeves snaps to attention.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)  
General LeMay will see you now.

**INT. GENERAL LEMAY'S OFFICE - PENTAGON**

Steeves walks into the office. He salutes Lemay who continues working at a wide desk with nothing but a blotter and a pen.

GENERAL LEMAY  
(without glancing up)  
At ease.

STEEVES  
I'm here to ask for your help, Sir.

LeMay sets his pen down. Leans back in his chair.

GENERAL LEMAY  
Is that so?

STEEVES  
I think it's only right that the  
Air Force come to my defense. The  
recent developments--

GENERAL LEMAY  
Are between you and the Post.

STEEVES  
You're just going to stand by as  
they cast doubt on an officer of  
the Air Force?

LeMay drums his fingers on the desk.

GENERAL LEMAY  
Have you heard of the RT-33A?

Steeves looks confused.

GENERAL LEMAY (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
Soviet aircraft.  
(beat)  
I hadn't either, until a few days  
ago when the NSA briefed the  
President and myself on the design  
for the new jet which they've found  
in the hands of the Soviets.

Steeves stares blankly.

GENERAL LEMAY (CONT'D)

Camera in the nose, additional recon equipment in the rear. It's a spy plane with quite a few similarities to one of our own jets.

(beat)

Some analysts have gone so far as to surmise it was *modeled* after the T-33. An aircraft you know intimately.

STEEVES

(glaring)

I resent the implication.

GENERAL LEMAY

Then answer me this one simple question, Lieutenant. Where is your goddamn jet? I've been looking, day-in day-out for months, and nothing.

Steeves takes a deep, fiery breath.

STEEVES

I counted every search plane. All of them came and went in the first ten days. The sky went quiet after that. Didn't seem all that valuable then.

LeMay sneers.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

I can't tell you where the jet's gone. Just the same as you can't tell me why you'd so readily toss one of your own to the wolves, with no hard evidence of wrongdoing.

(beat)

I'm no hero, General. Never was. You cooked that one up. But I'm sure as hell not a traitor either.

Lemay considers the words carefully.

GENERAL LEMAY

I'm assigning you to teach basic survival, Lieutenant.

(acerbic)

Where your particular set of skills are better suited.

STEEVES

Where I can't touch another jet.

GENERAL LEMAY

I believe we're done here.

STEEVES

(cracking, desperate)  
Don't take away my wings.

GENERAL LEMAY

I strongly suggest you salute me  
and walk out of this room before I  
throw in a demerit for  
insubordination.

Against every muscle in his body, as if dignity is paralyzing his arm, he fights to salute the General, turns sharply, and marches out of the room.

**EXT. BACKYARD - RITA'S FAMILY HOME - FAIRFIELD, CT - DAY**

Steeves walks outside, dropping his luggage by the door.

Birthday decorations litter the backyard-- half-eaten cake, sinking balloons. The remnants of Leisa's party that Steeves missed.

Leisa and Bobby tackle Harry on the lawn. He falls to the ground, theatrically as the children giggle.

Steeves' eyes settle on Rita across the yard, sitting beside Ruth.

Ruth spots him standing at a distance. She says something consolatory to Rita, pats her leg, then walks off, leaving an open seat next to her.

Steeves approaches, painfully slow. He takes the seat beside Rita, and they sit in silence, watching Leisa play.

RITA

David--

STEEVES

I've already contacted a lawyer.  
I'm not giving up until The Post  
admits to wrongdoing.

Rita doesn't budge, keeping her eyes on her daughter.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

Everything I went through,  
everything that's happening to me--  
to us-- it means nothing unless I  
can find a way to bring our family  
together again.

Leisa spins in circles until she falls down, dizzy.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

I love you, Rita.  
(desperate)  
All that's good in my life is  
because of you.

Staring straight ahead, in a tone devoid of all emotion--

RITA

I'm taking her with me, David.  
Don't try to speak to us again.

Rita stands, strolls towards Leisa, picks her up from the  
grass, and tickles her as she laughs in her mother's arms.

Rita holds her over her shoulder and walks towards the house.  
Steeves meets eyes with his daughter, who gazes at him with  
confusion and longing as Rita pulls back the screen door and  
disappears into the house.

**INT. WAREHOUSE - BOLLING AIR FORCE BASE - DAY**

Steeves is led inside by a timid CADET.

CADET

That's your station. All the basic  
survival materials are there for  
your review.

The Cadet leaves Steeves alone in the empty hangar. Dusty  
manuals stacked high on the dimly lit, metallic desk.

**INT. CLASSROOM - BOLLING AIR FORCE BASE - DAY**

Steeves stands in front of a group of CADETS in a sparse,  
dark classroom. He flips to a new slide that features an  
edible berry.

STEEVES

(uninspired)  
This was one of the berries that  
saved my life. You'll find them in  
thickets of tall grass.

Steeves switches to a new slide: him outside of the Cedar Grove Ranger Station in Kings Canyon. Only someone has etched "TRAITOR" over the slide.

Steeves glances around him, noting the steely tension in the room. He switches to the next slide without a word about it.

**INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - LAW OFFICE - DAY**

Steeves sits across from a LAWYER and a REPRESENTATIVE from Curtis Publishing. His lawyer, SAMUEL B PICONE, by his side.

Ties loose. Water cups empty. They've been negotiating a settlement for hours.

SAMUEL B PICONE

To avoid a hearing, Curtis Publishing Company agrees to award my client ten thousand dollars for failing to live up to agreements made.

One lawyer whispers to the other. After a beat, he nods.

LAWYER

Curtis Publishing accepts.

Sam pats Steeves on the back.

**EXT. LAW OFFICE - DAY**

Steeves exits the building, lights his tobacco pipe.

He glances around the near-empty parking lot. No one there to document this victory.

**INT. BLAIR'S OFFICE - SATURDAY EVENING POST - DAY**

Blair's eyes creep over his typewriter to spy on the SUITED MEN huddled in the conference room, speaking with Ben Hibbs.

Ben stands and shakes hands with the men. He holds the door open and they funnel out into the bullpen. A few of them trade glances with Blair as they pass his office.

Standing up straight by the door of the conference room, Ben signals for Blair.

**INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER**

Blair and Ben, eye to eye.

BEN

Well.

BLAIR

(resigned to his fate)  
Pack it up?

BEN

Congratulations. You've been bumped  
to Managing Editor.

Blair blinks, dumbfounded. Then, worried for Ben--

BLAIR

What about you?

BEN

Editor-in-Chief.

Blair furrows his brow, he can't believe it.

BEN (CONT'D)

Readership's at an all-time high;  
they attribute it to your  
uncompromising pursuit of the  
truth.

BLAIR

I still don't know the truth.

BEN

That's alright. Seems like  
everybody else does.

Blair doesn't react.

BEN (CONT'D)

Hey, you said it yourself-- was  
there any other option?

Ben pats him on the shoulder and walks out of the room,  
leaving Blair to ruminate on the question.

**INT. OFFICE - BOLLING AIR BASE - DAY**

Steeves speaks with a BASE COMMANDER, gathering paperwork on  
his desk.

BOLLING BASE COMMANDER  
 Sign here and you're a free man--  
 officially released from the Air  
 Force. At your own request, of  
 course. That will be made known to  
 the public.

Steeves signs the paper without a second thought.

BOLLING BASE COMMANDER (CONT'D)  
 Can I ask you something?  
 (beat)  
 Off the books.

Steeves looks up from his signature.

BOLLING BASE COMMANDER (CONT'D)  
 How much they offer you for your  
 life rights?

STEEVES  
 Ten grand.

BOLLING BASE COMMANDER  
 Christ. I'd fall out of the sky for  
 that kind of coin.

STEEVES  
 Give it a shot.

Steeves turns to leave but before he can get out the door,  
 the base commander can't help himself...

BOLLING BASE COMMANDER  
 Was it worth it?

Steeves pauses. Doesn't answer, or turn-- just continues out  
 the door to start a new life as a civilian.

**EXT. AIR FORCE BASE - MOMENTS LATER**

Steeves sheds his Air Force uniform, tosses it in the trunk  
 haphazardly. He puts on jeans, T-shirt, and a baseball cap.

He climbs in the Jaguar, and drives off.

**EXT. INTERSTATE HIGHWAY - LATER**

Steeves drives across the newly constructed interstate  
 highway, passing under a sign reading CALIFORNIA: 2000 MILES.

TRANSITION TO:

**INT. COCKPIT - AIRCRAFT - DAY**

Steeves steers a light aircraft over familiar terrain, seated beside a kindhearted co-pilot in his fifties, HARRY HERNIER.

CHYRON: 10 YEARS LATER

STEEVES

Running good.

HARRY J HERNIER

Hell of a lot smoother. Is there anything you can't fix?

The question stings a bit, but Steeves shrugs it off.

STEEVES

Mind if we take the scenic route back?

Harry knows why but let's Steeves off the hook.

HARRY J HERNIER

Sure, kid.

Steeves hangs a left towards the Sierras, eyes set on the haunting mountain range ahead.

**INT. HANGAR - FRESNO, CA - DAY**

The light plane is stationed inside an old wooden hangar. Steeves throws on a leather jacket as Harry logs the flight.

STEEVES

Heading out.

HARRY J HERNIER

To take the throne?

STEEVES

That's right.

HARRY J HERNIER

Give my best to Cordelia.

Steeves waves in response, exiting beneath a flicking bulb.

**INT. STAGE - FRESNO REGIONAL THEATER - NIGHT**

Steeves is on stage, dressed as King Lear in a cheap local production of the Shakespearian tragedy.

STEEVES

'The terrors of the earth!'

He delivers an impassioned monologue before a crowd of twenty peppered throughout the paint-chipped theater.

STEEVES (CONT'D)

'You think I'll weep. No, I'll not weep. I have full cause of weeping, but this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws or ere I'll weep...'

We notice a YOUNG WOMAN amidst the senior citizens in the back of the audience. The saddest of expressions on her face.

**INT. LOBBY - THEATER - NIGHT**

Steeves signs a program for an elderly couple. The shoddy powder makeup fails to hide his heavy bags and glass eyes. The years have not been kind.

He spots the young woman in the corner of the lobby, near the beverages, patiently waiting her turn. They meet eyes.

Emotion floods back in to a life that has become a dry riverbed. He doesn't move. Neither does she.

**INT. BAR - FRESNO - LATER**

Steeves sips on a whiskey across from the young woman.

STEEVES

Your mom would kill me if she knew.

YOUNG WOMAN / LEISA

I'm my own person now.

STEEVES

Sixteen. Maybe a little ways to go.

LEISA

(hurt, but hiding it)  
Fifteen.

Steeves looks at his watch. 9pm.

STEEVES

Only for another three hours.

Steeves smiles warmly. An awkward silence settles between them; both searching for the right words.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
 Everything you've heard about me...  
 I've never had the chance to tell  
 my side of it-- who I really am.

LEISA  
 I know enough.

STEEVES  
 No, I don't think you do.

Steeves takes a deep breath.

STEEVES (CONT'D)  
 It's important for you to hear  
 this, Leisa-- cause at the end of  
 it all, only your story survives...

TRANSITION TO:

**INT. GREYHOUND BUS - NIGHT**

Leisa bumps along the road with a few other PASSENGERS. The bar lights fading behind her. She never looks back.

STEEVES (V.O.)  
 People can believe or disbelieve  
 mine as they choose.

**INT. BEDROOM - BEFORE DAWN**

Steeves, sleepless, turns off his alarm at 5:59A before it chimes. He slips out of the covers.

STEEVES (V.O.)  
 If it is so miraculous they don't  
 believe, then it is just that much  
 better of a story.

**EXT. HOME - FRESNO - DAWN**

Steeves steps off the porch of his modest home and heads toward his now-rusty Jaguar with a cup of coffee in hand.

**EXT. TARMAC - MORNING**

A light aircraft starts its propeller.

**INT. AIRCRAFT - CONTINUOUS**

Steeves adjusts gears, prepping for flight. He looks out at the sun cresting over hilltops.

He slides an old photo from his breast pocket and fixes it to the control panel. Rita and Leisa watch over him, as he sets the aircraft into motion.

STEEVES (V.O.)

You're the only one who deserves to know the truth...

**INT. BAR - FRESNO - NIGHT**

Steeves sits across from Leisa. Jaw clenched. He's just finished his story in its entirety. He leans in.

STEEVES

All I want is for you not to live the rest of your life thinking your father's some kind of bad guy.

(beat)

Do you believe me?

Leisa's eyes are wet. She fights to keep her composure.

LEISA

I'm very sorry to tell you this, but none of that matters to me.

Steeves' face drops, bewildered.

LEISA (CONT'D)

All I ever wanted was for you to be my dad.

(long pause)

Why did you stop being my dad?

Of all the pain Steeves has endured, this is the pinnacle. It washes over him, filling every cell in his body, as he stares at his daughter with profound love, and deep regret.

Leisa checks her watch, then collects her things from the table as tears well up in Steeves eyes.

LEISA (CONT'D)

Good luck with your play.

Leisa turns and walks out of the bar.

Steeves sits there, alone, bathing in his sorrow, until suddenly, he springs off his seat and exits the bar.

**EXT. BAR - CONTINUOUS**

Steeves spots Leisa walking to a bus stop down the road. He runs after her.

**EXT. BUS STOP - CONTINUOUS**

Steeves reaches Leisa, last in a short line to board the bus.

In her eyes he sees immense resentment; but behind all the pain is the innocent eyes of a child longing for a hug from her father.

Steeves wraps his arms around her and pulls her close.

STEEVES

I'm sorry... I'm so sorry.

Leisa gives in. She rests her head on her father's chest, tears streaming down her cheeks.

BUS DRIVER

Moving out.

Leisa holds her father a second longer, than breaks away, gives him one last look, and boards the bus. The doors shut.

As the BUS ENGINE THROBS we're immediately pulled back to:

**INT. AIRCRAFT - MORNING - PRESENT**

PROPELLERS WHIR as Steeves welcomes the orange sun cresting the horizon. He kisses his finger, then touches it to the weathered photo of Rita and Leisa, lost in reverie...

**INT. COCKPIT - FLASHBACK**

*Steeves soars over snow-capped MOUNTAINS, guiding his plane up through layers of broken stratus clouds.*

*As he settles into a cruising altitude, his eyes set, looking at a PHOTOGRAPH jammed into the lower corner of his windshield: Rita and Leisa, smiling-- pure innocence...*

*Ashamed at having just been with another woman, he plucks the photo and seals it in his breast pocket.*

**EXT. TARMAC - MORNING - PRESENT**

Steeves' light aircraft chugs down the airstrip.

**INT. COCKPIT - FLASHBACK**

*Steeves lifts a radio transmitter, flips a switch on the control panel, set to report his coordinates, when...*

*BAM!*

*A DEAFENING BLOW knocks Steeves out cold.*

**TARMAC - PRESENT**

*Just as the plane is about to lift off, an axel SNAPS, and it nose-dives into the asphalt.*

*The aircraft flips, rips apart, careens off the end of the runway, and comes to a fiery halt as it crashes into a shed.*

*RUNWAY OPERATORS race to the scene as smoke billows out of the shed.*

**COCKPIT - FLASHBACK**

*STEEVES COUGHS AWAKE. Eyes open to the SMOKE-FILLED cockpit.*

*Head lolling, half-conscious, Steeves loosens his OXYGEN MASK and breathes in the TOXIC BLACK FUMES. Mistake.*

*He straps the mask back on, SUDDENLY ALERT.*

*He spots FLASHING RED LIGHTS on the control panel, seizing to the sound of PIERCING ALARMS. The cockpit slams him around like a boot in a washing machine.*

*Steeves lurches for the control stick but is yanked back by his safety belt. Writhing in the harness, he stretches and finally GRABS HOLD. Eases back on it.*

*No response.*

**INT. HOSPITAL - PRESENT**

*BADLY BURNT, Steeves is rushed on a gurney by MEDICAL STAFF down a long hallway, clinging to life...*

**COCKPIT - FLASHBACK**

*Panic pounding his chest, Steeves shifts his feet from RUDDER PEDALS to SEAT STIRRUPS. Lifts the left-hand ARMREST, and locks the seat harness in place.*

He eyes a RED PULL-LEVER marked "INITIATOR." Lunges for it.

The CANOPY JETTISONS OFF, sucked into the ether; smoke clears from the cockpit, instantly replaced by EAR-SPLITTING WIND.

SHAKING VIOLENTLY, Steeves pulls back the right-hand ARMREST, revealing a hidden TRIGGER. His index finger curls around it.

EYES SLAM SHUT as he let's out a deep, guttural GROWL to coax himself into stoking the TRIGGER.

An EXPLOSIVE CHARGE sparks beneath his seat.

WHITE INFERNO rockets Steeves out of the cockpit. He WHIPS BACK into thick clouds as the jet blasts ahead at 425 mph.

ROCKET DEPLETED, Steeves free-falls into the gray abyss.

### **HOSPITAL - PRESENT**

Steeves' watery eyes flutter as a DOCTOR pumps his heart...

### **SKY - FLASHBACK**

Steeves free-falls through the clouds.

Tumbling head over feet, gaining rapid velocity, his arms swim to locate a D-RING on his shoulder strap.

POP! The parachute deploys, catching air and RIPPING him back up. His jet seat tumbles on, vanishing in the clouds.

Steeves loosens his oxygen mask, and breathes. All goes silent as he drifts peacefully through heavenly white clouds.

Suddenly the clouds part, revealing-- menacing, ice-peaked MOUNTAINS rising up beneath his feet.

Spiraling to earth, the mountains gain razor sharp texture. A FLAT ROCK projects from the side of a steep slope.

Steeves aims for the natural platform. But he's coming in hot. Too swift to land safely.

### **HOSPITAL**

Steeves eyes set, he takes one last breath...

### **SKY**

Steeves tucks his limbs... 20 feet... 10 feet... 5 feet...

### **HOSPITAL**

... and FLAT-LINES.

**SKY**

... and SMASHES INTO ICE.

**SLAM TO BLACK.**

We hold on the black void as the sound of the flat line slowly fades to silence--

And we hold on that deafening silence just long enough to convince the audience we've come to the end--

A few even stand up to leave the theater, just before we...

**FADE BACK IN:**

**EXT. KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARK - DAY**

CHYRON: SPRING, 1977

A BOY SCOUT TROOP hikes through the forest.

A SMALL SCOUT trips on something in the dirt. The others boys pass him, chuckling, teasing.

Small Scout lifts a leather-bound BOOK out of the dirt and turns it over in his hands.

It's a bible. Worn and weathered.

He opens the front covering and finds an engraving:

DAVID ARTHUR STEEVES.

He starts thumbing through the yellowed pages, when suddenly, a SHOUT draws his attention up ahead...

He jogs toward the others, gripping the bible tight.

Cresting a small hill, he discovers his troop circling...

A wrecked T-33 AIRCRAFT CANOPY covered in moss and brush.

**INT. KITCHEN - BLAIR'S HOME - WASHINGTON DC - DAY**

Agnes, now in her 50s, prepare a meal on a marble island in this newly modeled suburban tract home.

Blair sits at the table, editing a document. Hair thinned, glasses thicker, 50's. He's lived comfortably, but beneath his soft exterior is a man still weathering a storm.

Blair's attention drifts to a flickering television in the other room, stirred by something he sees.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - RITA'S HOME - CONTINUOUS**

LEISA, now in her mid-twenties, has a small TV on in the background while preparing for an exam.

NEWSCASTER (ON TV)

The wreckage is presumed to belong to Air Force pilot Lieutenant David Steeves...

Leisa looks up from her textbook in disbelief.

NEWSCASTER (ON TV)

... who emerged from the wilds of Kings Canyon to face controversy in 1957, dying tragically ten years later in a second plane wreck.

**LIVING ROOM**

Blair stands alone in the living room, watching the report.

NEWSCASTER

The troop leader who discovered the canopy contacted the Air Force who confirmed the identity of the plane by its serial number...

Kemp, now in his 20s, appears beside him.

KEMP

I remember him. He had that wicked beard.

Kemp turns to his father, curious about his interest.

Blair watches on, his eyes soft and teary. Regret. Relief.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - RITA'S HOME - CONTINUOUS**

TIGHT ON the television set as the broadcast switches to a recording of the bright-eyed Troop Leader:

TROOP LEADER

We do this trip every year. I don't know why I chose to change the route this time, but..

As another celebrity is born, Leisa turns off the TV. Her reflection lingering inside the black box.

**INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER**

Leisa walks in.

RITA, mid 40s, sits at the table, grading psychology papers. She smiles dimly at the sight of her daughter.

As Leisa debates what to say, if anything at all, we...

**FADE TO BLACK.**

**SUPERIMPOSE:** "We present this story, not in defense of David Steeves as an individual, but in the hope that those who read it will be reminded of the infinite complexity of human beings— and of the folly and danger of judging them too quickly and too severely." -- Redbook Magazine, 1958