

BLOOD ON THE PRAIRIE

One-Hour Dramatic Television Pilot

EXT. RENVILLE COUNTY SETTLEMENT - DAY

SUPER: BASED ON TRUE EVENTS

A serene, sunlit day in a Renville County, Minnesota settlement along the Minnesota River.

Settlers engage in daily activities: men laboring on homesteads, women hanging laundry, children playing.

SUPER: RENVILLE COUNTY, MINNESOTA - AUGUST 18, 1862

Suddenly, a group of approximately 50 Santee Sioux warriors, faces and bodies adorned with war paint, charge into the settlement.

One warrior draws a bow, releasing an arrow that strikes a young girl in the back of the skull.

A female settler screams upon seeing her daughter lifeless on the ground.

Chaos erupts: arrows fly, rifle shots ring out, and the air is filled with the screams of women and children as settlers and warriors flee in all directions.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. RURAL NEBRASKA COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

SUPER: PRESENT DAY

The screen is mottled with the opening credits—white letters drifting across a wide pale sky. A sparse guitar picks along, steady and small; the wind moves through corn like a low, constant note.

INT. POST OFFICE - SUTTON, NEBRASKA - DAY

A row of Post Office boxes.

A metal clink as one opens.

STEVE WISEMAN (early 40's) opens his P.O. Box.

His hair cut close at the temples, a weathered face that takes light and keeps it, sleeves rolled up to reveal hands that look like they've held a steering wheel longer than a hammer.

He pulls a bundle from the box – bills, flyers, a postcard – and then a package the size of a book, wrapped in plain brown paper, edges soft from travel. No flashy label. Just a strip of clear tape and his name, handwritten, "Steve Wiseman."

Close on his hands as he lifts it.

The package lingers while the credits scroll across the top of the frame.

He lets the mail fall into his palm.

EXT. POST OFFICE – SUTTON, NEBRASKA – DAY

He steps out into bright, raw light. The old pickup is parked where it always is – small dents, a bumper sticker half-faded.

He throws the door open, slides in, tosses the mail onto the passenger seat, and the engine coughs to life.

The camera follows from above as the truck pulls away, then cuts to a low angle on the passenger seat where the package sits framed by sunlight and dust motes.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD – RURAL SUTTON, NEBRASKA – DAY

Two-lane blacktop, no shoulder.

On both sides, corn towers like living walls, leaves whispering.

The truck bisects the landscape; a long, pale sky hangs overhead.

The credits drift across the frame in slow motion—names floating above the corn, above the capillaries of sunlight.

Inside the cab, his face is economy of expression: no smile, not yet any question.

He glances at the package now and then as if it might explain itself.

He taps his fingers on the wheel in time with the music playing under the credits.

Ahead, a break in the corn reveals a thin line of trees.

He eases off the road and pulls up to a rusted metal gate, half-hidden in vines.

The gate is old, the kind that remembers years of winter.

He gets out, lifts the latch – a small, dead-sounding clack – and the gate swings open with a creak that seems too loud in that hush of corn and distant sky.

He drives through.

The corn fields close, a green ocean abruptly giving way to a pocket of dense woods.

The dirt driveway is narrow and rutted, lined by oaks and cottonwoods whose leaves make a dappled pattern on the truck's hood.

The trees lean in like spectators.

The credits move with the light, lower now, names slipping behind branches.

EXT. STEVE'S CABIN DRIVEWAY – DAY

The dirt gives way to a small clearing.

A weathered cabin sits tucked into the trees, white paint flaking, a porch with one chair and a stack of firewood.

He kills the engine.

The silence that follows is not empty – there are birds, the hum of distant insects, the memory of highway noise that the trees have swallowed.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN – DAY

He crosses the threshold, boots thunking on scuffed wood.

The interior smells of coffee gone cold and oil.

He drops the mail on the counter; the package hits with a dull thud.

He doesn't unwrap it.

He brushes his palms down his jeans, stands a moment with his back to it.

The package remains, centered in the quiet.

Close enough to see the grain of the brown paper, the small, neat handwriting of his name, a postage stamp from a place he doesn't recognize. Light from the window slants across it, throwing a narrow rectangle on the counter.

Dust floats across the top like slow snowfall.

The credits glide over the corner of the frame, a final name sliding into place and then fading.

He turns and walks back outside.

The screen holds on the package, the center of the shot, the weight of it in the quiet cabin.

For a long beat, nothing else moves.

Outside, he stops at the edge of the porch and looks out over the field where the corn ripples under the afternoon sky.

He folds his arms against a breeze that brings the smell of earth and late summer.

He breathes the kind of long breath that could be a promise or a warning.

Inside, on the counter, the package waits.

The camera lingers until the sound of a distant crow cuts the silence and the last of the credits fades away.

Then the scene holds on that brown paper, the place where the story will begin.

EXT. SWEETGRASS PATCH – DAY

A small, carefully tended plot beside the cabin, a green island against the corn.

The leaves of sweetgrass bend in a warm breeze, their tops shining like strings of gold.

Steve kneels at the edge of the patch.

He moves with a practiced tenderness – scissors in one hand, gathering several long, glossy stems with the other.

He cuts cleanly, lifts a handful to his face and inhales. The aroma is rich, sweet and green.

His jaw eases into a small, private smile.

He gathers two more handfuls, ties them loosely with twine, then stands and walks back toward the cabin.

The camera tracks over his shoulder: the cabin porch, the pickup where earlier the package rested, the stretch of corn beyond.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN - DAY

Natural light slants across the worn table.

The mail lies where he left it; the brown-paper package sits slightly apart, a quiet foreign object against the familiar clutter of coffee rings and a ceramic mug.

The postmark is visible but the return address is not.

Steve sets the bundles down, strips a length of grass free and lays the stems on the table.

He works with slow, confident motions – three strands, over and under, fingers moving in a steady rhythm.

The braiding is intimate and meditative; his hands remember the pattern as if from muscle memory.

Close on his hands: Callused thumbs, a small scar across the left index.

The sweetgrass slips through them like water.

Each pass tightens the braid; the scent rises in a small cloud.

Wider shot – the package: It sits within his sightline.

He glances up as he crosses one strand over another, then back down.

The braid grows.

He glances again, longer this time, as if measuring the distance between what he's making and what's been delivered.

He ties the finished braid with a thin strip of leather.

It looks like an offering, or an anchor. He sets it aside on the counter, so close to the brown package they almost touch.

A beat.

He breathes in the sweetgrass, closes his eyes.

The package is still there.

He resumes braiding another length, fingers finding the cadence again, eyes flicking to the package every few movements, each glance a small question left unasked.

A faint creak of the house settling, a distant corn rustle.

The shot holds on Steve's hands at work, the braid growing, the parcel waiting on the counter.

Two objects braided into the quiet of the cabin.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN – LATE AFTERNOON

Light softens toward gold.

Steve moves with the same careful rhythm as before.

He takes a handful of the braided sweetgrass, lays it on the table and, with a small, sharp knife, slices it into fine, fragrant pieces.

The blade makes a whisper against the wood.

Tiny green threads scatter like confetti.

Steve heats water on the small stove.

He drops the cut sweetgrass into a teapot, pours the steaming water, watches the steam curl up in slow, sweet spirals.

He lifts the pot to his nose, inhales – the aroma is immediate and full, grass and sun and something older.

He pours the tea into a ceramic mug.

The liquid is pale, green-gold.

He picks up the brown-paper package from the counter.

For a moment he turns it over in his hands, fingers tracing the taped seams until he finds the flap.

He settles into the old recliner by the window, the mug steaming in his palms, the package poised on his knee like a contained history.

Close on the package.

His thumb loosens the tape.

The paper gives with a soft sound.

He unfolds the inner wrapping carefully, as if unwrapping someone's memory.

Reveal a buckskin covered book: A journal, the buckskin darkened and creased, edges soft with handling, the leather smell sharp under the sweetgrass steam.

The spine is hand-stitched; a small leather thong hangs loose.

The cover carries no title, only the whisper of many years.

He opens the front flap and finds a folded note tucked between the first leaves.

He unfolds it. The handwriting is his mother's: familiar loops, an economy of strokes.

He reads aloud, slow and steady, the words landing in the warm hush of the cabin.

STEVE

(soft)

Steve, After your grandpa's funeral, we found this old diary in a wooden chest in the attic. It's your Great-Great Grandfather, Henson Wiseman's diary. Your brother said we should send it to you. Love. MOM

He closes his eyes for a beat, the sound of his mother's voice in the script.

There is a small, private lift at the corner of his mouth, a ghost of a smile, an ache.

He sets the note on his knee, fingers lingering on the paper as if he can keep the words warm.

The diary fills the frame, its pages yellowed.

He opens to the first page.

The paper is yellowed, fibrous, edges feathered.

Ink has browned with time.

At the top of the first page, a date is scrawled in a hand that is both deliberate and spare.

He lingers over the lines, reading the first sentence under the date, the ink catching in places where the pen paused.

His face holds steady as he reads – the way the light catches the stubble at his jaw, the lines at his eyes that crease just so.

The sweetgrass steam rises between him and the window; outside the corn murmurs.

Inside, the buckskin book sits heavy in his hands, the package that brought it now a small empty shell on the floor.

He takes a sip of the tea.

The flavor is strong and oddly comforting.

He looks down at the diary again, then out through the window at the endless rows of corn at once a landscape and a starting point.

He turns another page.

A close of the diary's interior, inked words opening like a door.

The sound of Steve breathing, the whisper of leaf and page, blends with the late-afternoon hush.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN - LATE AFTERNOON

Steve sits in the recliner, the buckskin journal open on his knee. He breathes in the steam from his cup.

He finds a page; at the top, in faded ink:

October 21, 1862

Steve looks up toward the window for a moment, then lowers his eyes and begins to read aloud.

His voice is steady - the voice of a man holding another man's words in his hands.

STEVE

(reading)

October the twenty-first, 1862.

HENSON (V.O.)

(in a measured, weathered cadence)

The Missouri runs fast this month.
Loaded my wagon before first light
- flour and coffee, nails in a
barrel, a keg of kerosene and a
bale of canvas, venison, pheasant,
and honey from the bee hives. Said
my goodbyes to the kids and hitched
the grey to the tongue. St. James
will be busy; word out says more
boats comin' with men and freight
than usual.

As Steve reads, the image on screen begins to dissolve.

FLASHBACK - EXT. TERRAIN OUTSIDE ST. JAMES - OCTOBER 21, 1862
- DAY

A horse-drawn wagon creaks over a rutted prairie track.

The grey horse's flanks are dusted with frost.

HENSON WISEMAN (44) sun-leathered face, a brimmed hat, a heavy coat - sits upright on the wagon bench, reins in one hand, a coil of rope in the other.

The wagon is piled high with burlap sacks and wooden barrels, tarpaulin lashed over one corner.

HENSON (V.O.)

There were clouds to the west that held rain and the smell of coming earth. The road ran soft and the prairie lay wide as a new cloth. I kept steady to the track the settlers had beaten to the river.

The wagon bounces, splashes through a muddy hollow. Prairie grass brushes the wheels; a distant line of cottonwoods marks the river's course.

HENSON (V.O.)

We met a man on the way, name like Jacob, with a skiff tied to his pole. He warned of a low bank at the Landing - the river's taken to hiding its shallows. "Watch the current," he says. "She's swift, Henson. The boats'll be here by noon."

A distant sound grows: a rhythmic thump and a long, low whistle. The trees give way to the wide, brown sweep of the Missouri, sunlight on water like iron. Upriver, a paddlewheel steamboat churns, fog of steam and coal smoke around its stacks. Men on the deck gesture; a long gangplank is lowered to the muddy bank.

HENSON (V.O.)

I tied the mare and eased down the bank. There was a bustle at the Landing - deckhands with coil of rope, merchants callin' prices, a boy with a jar full of nails in his pocket tryin' to sell me a story for a copper.

EXT. MISSOURI RIVER AT ST. JAMES, NEBRASKA - DAY

The wagon noses onto the sloping mud.

Men in canvas jackets jump down and grunt as they unload sacks, the cloth rasping, barrels thumping onto the dock.

A tall stevedore grins with missing teeth; a young deckhand wipes his hands on his trousers and points at the boat.

DECKHAND

(to Henson)

You Wiseman? We got space on the
Liza M. Today or never.

Henson gives a small, pragmatic nod. He lifts sacks with practiced strength, the work a familiar rhythm.

HENSON (V.O.)

We loaded quick. It pays to be
quick on a river day - storms'll
come from nowhere and men'll turn
greedy when the water's high. I
spoke to a captain named Barrow;
tells me the river's been mean
toward the north channel. He paid
in coin and a promise he'd look out
for my name if I needed work
downriver.

A close shot: Henson's hands, rope-darkened, palms raw from the grain. He wipes his brow, a cut along his knuckle. He secures the last strap on a crate.

HENSON (V.O.)

I watched the stern wheel turn and
felt the boat pull free. The river
gave up its goods to the gangplank
and took its toll back in wake. I
sat a spell on the bank and let the
smell of coal and hot iron fill me.
It felt like the country breathin'
- hard and honest.

The Liza M. groans and sends a spray; its wake laps at the muddy shore. Men shout, a bell clatters. Henson lifts his hat to the captain; the captain tips his in return.

HENSON (V.O.)

When I climbed back into the wagon
the sun was low. There is a peace
to a work well done and a road that
knows you by the shape of your
wheel marks.

(MORE)

HENSON (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I turned the horse back toward
home, countin' the hours till
supper and the girls' laughin'
mouths.

The wagon recedes, the river glinting, the steamboat a black silhouette moving down an endless ribbon.

The scene holds on Henson's profile, resolute against the sky.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN - LATE AFTERNOON

Steve closes the journal softly on the page.

His fingers linger where Henson's script had paused.

Outside, the late sun drips gold into the corn.

He takes a slow sip of the sweetgrass tea, swallowing the last of Henson's voice like something that traveled through time.

For a beat, Steve simply sits, the cabin full of quiet, the diary warm in his hands.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN - LATE AFTERNOON

Steve holds the journal open again, thumb at the edge of the page where the ink has browned with time.

He reads the next lines under the same date.

STEVE
(reading)
...Stopped in at the General.
Needed rope and a tin of coffee.
The town always smells of molasses
and dust.

HENSON (V.O.)
The bell over the door gives a
thin, friendly clang and the warmth
of the stove meets me before the
light.

FLASHBACK - EXT. MAIN STREET, ST. JAMES - OCTOBER 21, 1862 - DAY

A single dirt street runs between a few low wooden buildings.

The General Store sits half-shadowed by a boardwalk; a painted sign swings lazily: GRAVES & KIN—GENERAL MERCHANDISE.

Henson reins the grey to the hitch-rail, dust shaking off his boots as he steps up onto the planks.

INT. GRAVES & KIN GENERAL STORE - DAY

The bell over the door tinkles.

Inside, sunlight strips through the windows and lands on barrels of flour, shelves of tins, rows of jars with pickled things.

A cigar box filled with coins sits on the counter.

The air is thick with coal smoke, horses, and the sour sweetness of molasses.

MR. GRAVES (late 40's) a man with a close beard and sleeves rolled to the elbow — looks up from a ledger.

He nods at Henson, recognizes the gait that comes with a man who knows wagons.

MR. GRAVES

Henson. Back from the river then?

HENSON (V.O.)

I told him I'd been down to the Landing. Said the Liza M. would be taking what she could and going on. He grunted and reached under the counter.

HENSON

(plain)

Need rope. Two fathoms. And coffee—best you've got. The girls'll be hungry.

Mr. Graves measures a length of hemp from a peg, cuts it with a practiced hand. He pats the tin of coffee as if testing its weight.

MR. GRAVES

(eyeing Henson)

You hear about the north channel? Barrow says it's changed since the storms. Men'll be watchin'.

HENSON (V.O.)

There was talk of channels and of men moving like the river – restless and looking for work. A boy in the corner hawked his father's newsprint about soldiers and distant places. War's a rumor that sits in a room with you; you can smell it, but it don't touch your hands unless you volunteer it.

Henson pays with a few carefully counted coins, small clink of metal. He tucks the rope and coffee under his arm.

HENSON

(soft)

I'll be back afore dusk. Tell Mrs. Graves I owe her for the last jar of preserves.

MR. GRAVES

(smiling)

We'll write it in the ledger – Wiseman's tab.

HENSON (V.O.)

I signed nothing in the ledger. A man's name on paper is a thing that bears watching; best to keep the marks where I can see them. I tipped my hat and stepped back into the light, the town's dust settling on my boots like a memory.

EXT. ST. JAMES MAIN STREET – DAY

Henson lifts his hat to a few neighbors; a child chases a hoop down the plank.

He climbs into the wagon. The grey snorts, the reins come alive in his hands.

He drives off – the General Store sliding behind him, its bell still faint in the air.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN – LATE AFTERNOON

Steve lifts his eyes from the page.

The single sentence is small on the paper, but the smell of coal and molasses from Henson's words seems to hang in the cabin for a moment.

He runs a fingertip down the margin, feeling the indent of the pen where Henson's hand pressed harder.

Outside the window, corn stalks sway like a slow, approving audience.

Inside, the diary lies heavy and patient in Steve's lap.

He sips the sweetgrass tea as if drinking from the same day, and turns the page.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN - DUSK

The light has cooled to gray gold.

Steve's thumb holds the page; his voice is low, careful as he reads.

STEVE

(reading)

...Met the sheriff on the road as
I come home. He had a hard look to
him.

HENSON (V.O.)

He rode out to meet me near the
fork by old Miller's elm. Sheriff
Collins—good man, iron in his
jaw—had his horse breathing hard
and his hat pulled low.

FLASHBACK - EXT. ROAD OUTSIDE ST. JAMES - OCTOBER 21, 1862 -
DAY

A narrow track between prairie and corn.

The grey horse snorts.

Henson squints against dust; a figure on horseback blocks the
road ahead—SHERIFF COLLINS (40's), star on his chest, coat
dust-flecked, eyes like river stone.

SHERIFF COLLINS

Henson. Good to see a friendly
face.

HENSON

Sheriff. You all right?

SHERIFF COLLINS

(shadowed)

Been better.

(MORE)

SHERIFF COLLINS (CONT'D)

There's news from up
north—Minnesota. God help us,
Henson, it's bad.

HENSON (V.O.)

He told me of settlements along the
Minnesota River—women and children
taken, houses burned. Said it was a
sweep of men caught up and angry;
said the army'd hauled in a great
number of Sioux, near on sixteen
hundred they say, and they're set
to trial in St. Paul.

The sheriff's voice is low, the words measured like horse
steps.

SHERIFF COLLINS

They've arrested a heap of them.
The army's doing their work. Folks
are frightened. Talk is they want
to be ready if the trouble
spreads—retribution, they call it.

Henson watches the sheriff's hands tighten on the reins.

HENSON (V.O.)

He told me the Nebraska Cavalry's
takin' volunteers—men to ride out
and watch the homesteads along the
Missouri. Said they'd pay a sum and
a stripe, but a man loses the plow
when he takes to soldierin'.

SHERIFF COLLINS

If folks don't step up, Henson,
they'll have nothing to stand
between them and fear. They're
asking who'll sign on. If you stay,
I'll do what I can to keep watch.
If you go, your name's known;
you'll be looked after.

HENSON

(quiet)

My kids are young. My place needs
the plow and the hands to keep it.
If trouble comes, they'll be the
ones.

SHERIFF COLLINS

I know. I'm not makin' it easy on
no man. Just tell you true.

(MORE)

SHERIFF COLLINS (CONT'D)
There's honor in standin' for your
neighbors, same as there's need in
tending your own.

HENSON (V.O.)
He tipped his hat and rode on. I
sat a bit by the road, the sky flat
and a long way off. The horse
chewed at a sprig. The land seemed
the same as always, but the
sheriff's words had a taste like
iron.

Henson studies the horizon, the wagon bench a small island of
thought.

HENSON (V.O.)
I turned the mare toward home,
thinkin' on the cost of a man's
absence and the stretch of what it
means to be a neighbor. If I go,
who'll mind the homestead? If I
stay, do I leave my name to the
valley and none to the cause when
it needs men?

The wagon moves. Henson's face is a map of decisions; the
prairie bends and does not answer.

HENSON (V.O.)
I write this by the light of the
coming dusk: the sheriff's words
keep walking in my head. There's a
pull to go—call it duty or fear—yet
the thought of leaving Phoebe and
the kids alone makes my hand go
cold. I don't yet know which way my
feet will take me. For now I ride
home with the rope and coffee and
that hard taste behind my teeth.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN - DUSK

Steve lifts his eyes from the page.

The sentence hangs in the room like a shadow.

He sets the journal down on his knee and looks at the
buckskin cover, as if the leather could tell him what Henson
decided.

A long breath.

Outside the corn whispers.

The package that held the book sits on the table, small and ordinary again.

Steve takes his cup, finds it cooler now, and stares at the margin where Henson's decision trembles between lines.

INT. HOTEL LOBBY — KEARNEY, NEBRASKA — DAY

A high-ceilinged lobby has been transformed into a bustle of booths and tables — furs, flintlock replicas, tins of stew, hand-lettered signs.

Men and women in period garb move among modern travelers, a hum of conversation and laughter under chandeliers.

A handmade sign hangs from Steve's table:

SWEETGRASS • BRAIDS & TEA.

Braids of sweetgrass lie in neat piles; a small kettle steams gently on a camp-stove burner.

The warm, vanilla-sweet scent of the grass hangs in the air around the table like an invisible banner.

Steve — wearing buckskin with fringe, a wide-brimmed hat, a leather satchel slung over his shoulder — stands behind the table.

His appearance is careful and lived-in: the look of a man who works with his hands as much as with his history.

He pours a small cup of sweetgrass tea for a passerby and offers a braid to another.

CURIOUS TOURIST (30s), camera hanging from his neck, approaches with a smile.

CURIOUS TOURIST

(smelling)

That smells amazing — like vanilla and fresh hay. What is it?

STEVE

(smiling)

Sweetgrass. Lots of folks know it for that scent. I braid it and people use it different ways — smudging, ceremonies, to welcome folks. It's used by many Indigenous peoples across this region.

(MORE)

STEVE (CONT'D)
 For us, it's also a garden thing –
 I grow it at home, harvest careful,
 braid and dry.

A REENACTOR – older, rough-bearded, genuine interest – leans in, inspecting a braid.

REENACTOR
 You can burn it like sage, right?
 Throw a little on the coals?

STEVE
 You can. Burns slow, sweet. Folks
 use it to sweeten the air, to pray,
 or as an offering. I always tell
 people to treat it respectfully –
 ask, learn, don't just buy it as a
 trinket. I braid them for scent and
 ceremony, and for folks who
 understand and respect the meaning.

Across the aisle, a HISTORY BUFF (50s) in spectacles thumbs a pamphlet and calls over.

HISTORY BUFF
 You dress the part too, Steve.
 Mountain man or fur trader?

STEVE
 Part mountain man, part field hand.
 Folks here like the look. Mostly I
 wear it because the clothes are
 practical – pockets, leather, the
 feel of an earlier life. But I grew
 up hearing stories – that's why I
 do the same work: to keep a thread
 going.

A YOUNG GIRL (8) tugs at her mother's sleeve and leans forward, eyes wide.

Steve bends and offers a braid so she can smell.

STEVE (CONT'D)
 (soft)
 Here – take a whiff.

The girl inhales, eyes closing.

YOUNG GIRL
 It smells like cookies.

STEVE
(laughing)
Like cookies and the sun.

A Native woman in the crowd – middle-aged, quiet, wearing an understated modern coat with a small beaded pin – pauses at the table. She watches for a moment, then steps closer. Steve notices, nods respectfully.

NATIVE WOMAN
(quiet)
You grow this yourself?

STEVE
Yes. On the homestead. I try to harvest slow, leave roots, replant where I can. I learned some from people up river and I've tried to honor that teaching – always ask, always give thanks.

The woman studies the braids, then offers a small, approving smile and a nod.

NATIVE WOMAN
That's good to hear.

She moves on; Steve returns to a man who has asked about buying several braids.

MIDDLE-AGED MAN
How long to make one of these?
Looks like a lot of work.

STEVE
Depends on the length. I braid while I talk, or while the stove's on. Takes patience – three plait, steady hands. People trade them for gifts or hang them in a home. They last a long time if you keep them dry.

Steve pours another cup from the steaming kettle and hands it to a passerby. The steam curls, carrying that warm vanilla top-note.

PASSERBY
(taking a sip)
That's surprisingly good. What does it taste like?

STEVE

Sweet, a little grassy, with a vanilla finish. Some people like it at night; some say it calms them. I always tell folks it's more than a flavor – it's about respect for where it comes from.

An OLDER WOMAN (local historian) lingers, curious and cautious.

OLDER WOMAN

There's been a lot of talk about wild-harvesting and over-picking. Where do you source it?

STEVE

From a plot I tend myself. I found a patch when I moved back, learned how to grow it. I don't take from wild stands where it's vulnerable. I keep a rotation – take a little, leave a lot. And I donate a portion of proceeds to local cultural programs when I can.

The woman nods, satisfied.

Another customer hands Steve money; he ties a braid with a leather strip and wraps it in brown paper, handing it over with a quiet, grateful nod.

A nearby reenactor, leaning on a post, watches the exchange.

REENACTOR

So you think folks at a convention like this – folks wanting the old life – understand the line between preservation and souvenir?

STEVE

Some do, some don't. My job is to try to show the way – the story and the craft. If someone wants to learn, I tell 'em straight. If they want it just to smell nice, I tell 'em the same: treat it like a thing with meaning.

Around them, the lobby continues its lively trade – a flintlock demonstration nearby, a moccasin-maker signing up customers, kids darting between booths.

The sweetgrass scent forms a small cloud around Steve's table, and people drift back to it as if drawn by the memory of a warm field.

Steve straightens a braid, fingers finding the loop of leather.

He glances at a small stack of business cards — HANDMADE SWEETGRASS · WISEMAN HOMESTEAD — and then at the crowd: faces curious, respectful, and some just passing through.

He pours another cup of tea, offering it to a young reenactor who looks unsure.

STEVE (CONT'D)
If you take one thing from here,
take the story. Braid with respect.
Drink with gratitude.

The reenactor accepts the cup, and for a moment the lobby hums with the shared, simple exchange — craft, scent, story — an old plant making new connections.

CUT TO:

Steve folding a fresh braid into a small paper bag, the vanilla-sweet steam trailing as the camera pulls back to take in the convention's lively tableau.

EXT. HOTEL LAWN — LATE AFTERNOON

A wide patch of grass between the hotel and the parking lot.

The painted tepee stands against a blue sky — tall cedar poles, canvas hand-painted in faded reds and ochres with geometric bands and a single stylized bird.

A light wind lifts the edge of the canvas, sending a soft whisper.

Steve kneels at the base, undoing rawhide ties, easing the poles free one by one.

He works methodically: poles together, canvas folded carefully, hands practiced and sure. Sweat darkens his shirt at the collar; the fringe of his buckskin jacket brushes the grass.

An older Native man — hair silvered, weathered face, a simple coat with a small beadwork pin at the lapel — walks slowly past the tepee.

He stops a few paces away, takes in the painted panels, the way the canvas has been set up for display.

He doesn't touch; he studies the patterns and the joinery with a quiet, appraising gaze.

He meets Steve's eyes.

Steve pauses, half-standing, brush of gratitude in his expression.

The elder lifts his head, gives a small, steady nod, not theatrical, but full of recognition, and a faint, approving smile.

The man turns and walks on, steps measured across the grass, his figure receding toward the line of convention-goers.

Steve exhales, a little of the tightness loosening in his shoulders.

He straightens and resumes folding the canvas, the nod resting in the place where the day's small reckonings settle.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN - NIGHT

Steve moves through the small ritual of getting ready for bed. Fire low in the stove, a kettle cooled to a soft tin of steam, boots set to the mat.

He draws the quilt up over his knees, takes the buckskin diary from the bedside table, and opens it to the next line under October 21, 1862.

He reads in a voice softer now, the room answering only with the tick of the mantel clock.

STEVE

(reading)

...Came home late by the west road.
The light was going and the house
stood warm against the plain.

FLASHBACK - EXT. WISEMAN HOMESTEAD - OCTOBER 21, 1862 - DUSK

A low house of weathered boards, smoke from the kitchen chimney cutting a thin grey line against the last of the light.

Henson's wagon crunches up the rutted drive.

At the sight of him, figures move from shadow to porch and yard — a small congregation of relief and bustle.

HENSON (V.O.)

There is no finer sight than your
own roof in the waning light.
Pheobe and the boys came runnin'
out first — Arthur with the
straight back of a man near his
work, Andrew and Henry skippin' and
shoutin', and little Loren clingin'
to Pheobe's skirt, too shy to run
all the way.

Henson steps down from the wagon.

PHEOBE WISEMAN (late 30's) strong-handed, hair threaded with early grey, apron dusted with flour — meets him at the gate.

LOREN WISEMAN (4) stands very close to Phoebe.

ARTHUR WISEMAN (16), tall at sixteen, brushes his hands on his trousers as if to say he was busy.

ANDREW WISEMAN (9) and WILLIAM "HENRY" WISEMAN (8) tumble forward, breathless with questions. LOREN hides partly behind Pheobe's ankle.

PHEOBE

(half-laughing)

You're late. You kept us wonderin'.
Brought us anythin' good from the
Landing?

HENSON

(soft)

Coffee and rope and a word from
Barrow. The Liza M. took what she
could. The shore's full of men and
a smell of coal.

ANDREW

(pressing)

Did you see the big boat, Pa? Did
they whistle loud?

HENSON

I did. She blew a long note, like a
name called out 'cross the water.

He reaches for Arthur's shoulder, steadier than a sermon.

HENSON (V.O.)

We traded small stories. Arthur told me how the fence's last corner holds; Pheobe spoke of the baking and that the potatoes were ready. Henry and Andrew fought over whose turn it was to feed the chickens. Loren wanted to show off a frog he'd caught.

Henson scans the yard, instinct flicking to absence.

HENSON

(looking for her)

Where's Hannah?

PHEOBE

(pointing toward the orchard)

Out by the hives, gatherin' honey. Said she'd be back afore dark. Thought she'd be careful.

HENSON (V.O.)

(from his diary)

Hannah, fourteen, steady on her feet, hands quicker than most boys her age. She keeps the bees since her father taught her, knows the hum and the ways to lift a box with a steady wrist.

Henson's face thins; the sheriff's words from earlier sit in his throat like gravel.

He imagines her among the hive boxes: the slow blue of smoke, the nervous flit of bees, a girl's silhouette bent to work.

HENSON

(under his breath)

Good. Tell her not to dally.

PHEOBE

She knows better, Henson. If she were to dally, she'd ask for help first.

HENSON (V.O.)

I hugged Pheobe close, breathed her in—the warm flour and the faint soap—then lifted my eyes to the dusk.

(MORE)

HENSON (V.O.) (CONT'D)
The land was the same and not the same: a man's worry grows in seasons, and a man's choice grows with it. I thought of the sheriff's talk of men ridin' out and of what it would mean to leave Hannah at the hives while I took a saddle.

INT. HENSON WISEMAN HOME - NIGHT

Henson sits at the table. Writing in his diary.

He pauses in the writing, pen pressing into the leather as the room grows darker.

HENSON (V.O.)
For now I unload the sacks, set the coffee on the table, and put the rope in the loft. I will go speak to Hannah when she comes in; a father may be stubborn, but he may be stubborn enough in the other direction - to keep his own at hand. The night is still. The girls' laughter follows me to the door. I write this by lamplight and lay down the pen: my mind pulls like a cart in two directions.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN - NIGHT

Steve closes the diary gently, the leather sighing shut.

He sits a moment in the dim, imagining Henson bending toward a daughter he hoped would be safe.

Outside, a distant truck hums on the highway, the modern world making soft noise beyond the prairie.

He turns down the lamp and lets the dark take the room, the old words warm and present under his palm.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN - MORNING

Sunlight is a promise behind low grey.

Steve moves through the small choreography of morning: lights the stove, flips flapjacks, cracks eggs into a cast-iron pan. The smell of frying fat and coffee fills the kitchen.

He eats at the counter, then pours a fresh cup, takes the buckskin diary, and carries both onto the front porch.

EXT. STEVE'S CABIN PORCH — MORNING

A thin fog lies like a shroud over the cornfields, silvering the rows.

As the kettle steam mingles with the morning mist, Steve settles into a wooden chair, diary open on his knee.

He breathes in the wet earth and vanilla from his coffee, and begins to read.

STEVE

(reading)

...We had breakfast all at the table this mornin'. The fog sat heavy like an old blanket but the house was warm.

FLASHBACK — INT. WISEMAN KITCHEN — OCTOBER 22, 1862 — MORNING

A long plank table rings with the scrape of forks and the clack of coffee cups.

Henson sits at the head, sleeves rolled, jaw marked by sun and wind.

Pheobe moves between stove and table, ladling porridge and passing plates.

Arthur, broad-shouldered, eats with the quiet certainty of a man who knows his tasks.

HANNAH WISEMAN (14), hair tucked back, still with a thin dust of pollen on her sleeves from the hives, sits alert.

Andrew and Willian "Henry" bicker over a piece of bacon; Loren clutches a wooden spoon like a talisman.

HENSON (V.O.)

I watch them while they eat. A
man's heart can be hard as an old
shoe, and soft as the inside of one
— depends on which part you look
at.

HENSON

(gruff, warm)
Arthur — mind the north fence
today.

(MORE)

HENSON (CONT'D)
 It caught the wind smart last night. Hannah — you'll shift the new frames to the east stand with the smoke; bees'll be calmer by noon.

HANNAH
 (nodding)
 I will, Pa.

ANDREW
 (trying to be helpful)
 Can I feed the pigs today, Pa? I'll do it!

HENSON
 You feed, but you watch—don't be so fast with the trough. Henry, you'll fetch the kindling outside. Loren—keep close to your Ma while she bakes.

Henson reaches across and ruffles Loren's hair.

Loren giggles, then hides behind Pheobe.

PHEOBE
 (soft reprimand)
 Don't go off, Loren. Stay with me, like Pa says.

HENSON (V.O.)
 I kept my voice short — no need to waste words. But my hands talk the same sometimes: when I touched Arthur's shoulder, that was a sermon; when I set a piece of bacon on Andrew's plate, that was a promise.

HENSON
 (softer, to Pheobe)
 We're sendin' Arthur to mend the fence with a plumb and a stubborn hand. Tell him to take his coat; the morning's sharp.

PHEOBE
 (smiling)
 He'll hear you without the sermon, Henry.

Henson gives a small, private grin and takes a slow sip of coffee.

The table eases into the work of a family: mouths full, plans made out loud.

HENSON (V.O.)

Once the bowls were empty, the list of chores was a litany. They fetched, they stacked, they knotted. One by one they left for the day. Arthur with a spade over his shoulder, the boys arguing on the stoop, Hannah with a bundle for the hives. Only Pheobe and little Loren stayed behind to tend the kitchen and the baby things.

The front door closes after the last boot.

The house breathes a quieter breath.

HENSON

(turning to Pheobe)

The sheriff rode out yesterday. He told me of Minnesota and of men taken. There's talk of the army holdin' many Sioux and of the Nebraskans callin' for volunteers to ride the river line.

Pheobe pauses with a dishcloth in hand.

Her face is steady but the color leaves her fingers.

PHEOBE

(soft)

You'd leave? For how long?

HENSON (V.O.)

Saying it to her makes it more real. Words mean a man's sleep.

HENSON

I don't know how long. Could be a season, could be shorter. They'll pay a man's wage for a spell and lay a stripe on his side. They ask for riders to sit the line and keep the homesteads safe.

PHEOBE

You came home last night, Henson. We need your hands here. Hannah's been gettin' the hives straight;

(MORE)

PHEOBE (CONT'D)

Arthur's half the man he says he'll be when he gets back from the fence. Who'll see the cows and the fields?

HENSON

(looking at her, honest)

I think on Hannah out at them hives the same as you, Phoebe. I think of her bent and steady and then I see a road with men on it. Some part of me hears the sheriff and says the neighbors need more hands. The other part hears the hearth and counts the ways we would manage.

PHEOBE

And your pride? You don't ride for pride, Henson. You'll ride for what you think is right.

HENSON

I don't want to be foolish. I want us to have a roof and the fields to eat from. If men go and the worst comes, I'd rather be one who stood than one who sat and wondered if I'd done enough.

PHEOBE

(eyes steady, a quiet bargain)

If you go, you go with my blessing and my fear. I will not pretend I'm not afeared, but I will tie your shirts and mend your socks. Promise you won't do a thing without telling me first. Promise you'll come home if you can.

HENSON

(half-smile)

I promise, Pheobe. I'll be careful. And if I'm to go, I'll make sure we have seed sown and the money put by for winter. I owe you that much.

PHEOBE

Then you'll think on it tonight. You won't saddle up on a bent wind.

HENSON (V.O.)

We stood there in the kitchen,
hands busy with work, and there
between us was a thing I call duty
and a thing I call family.
Sometimes duty is easy; sometimes
it is like a stone that sits in
your chest and you carry it until
you decide which shoulder will take
the weight.

He reaches and kisses Pheobe on the top of her head; she
hums, a small sound like a closed door.

Little Loren toddles forward and takes Henson's bootlace in
his fist.

Henson looks at him, more vulnerable than his face usually
shows.

HENSON

(soft)

You be good for your Ma, little
one. I'll see you before the moon
if I can.

LOREN

(serious)

Okay, Pa.

HENSON (V.O.)

We kept our faces the right way. I
wrote this by lamplight in the
evening, but the morning stayed
with me – the taste of coffee, the
smell of fresh bread, the little
hands that hold on when men make
choices.

EXT. STEVE'S CABIN PORCH – MORNING

Steve pauses, closing the diary an inch as if to let the
paper breathe.

He looks up, the cornfield now clearer as fog pulls away in a
ribbon.

A distant bird calls and the world smells of damp earth.

Suddenly, a sharp, modern ring cuts the quiet – a phone
insisting.

The sound is bright and alien against the hush of the porch.

Steve startles, the flashback breaking like thin ice.

He glances down at the kitchen table where his cell phone lies face-up.

The ring continues: insistent, corporate.

He closes the diary fully, tucks it under his arm, and lets the ringing spool out.

His gaze rests a long moment between the old leather and the bright screen.

INT. CABIN - MORNING

Steve picking up the phone, thumb hovering over a name.

The moment between past and present widens and holds.

Steve lifts the phone to his ear, the device still warm from his hand.

The voice on the line is immediate — KELLY WISEMAN (40's), a little breathless, the way a brother gets when he's glad to reach you.

KELLY (V.O.)

You there, Stevie? You get that package from Mom?

STEVE

Yeah. I got it last night. Thanks for checking.

KELLY (V.O.)

Good. I figured you should have it. There was a lot of old things at grampa's. I found that inside an old chest in the attic. Did you start reading it?

STEVE

(slight laugh)

I did. It's a diary... old leather, ink all in a neat hand. It's been sittin' with me since I opened it. Feels... strange, Kelly. Like it's talking back when I read it.

KELLY (V.O.)

You mean actual words? Or you mean that weird feeling people get in movies?

STEVE

Both, I guess. It's like something
in it is sticking under my ribs.
Makes the house feel older when I
read it.

KELLY (V.O.)

Huh. Well, you know Mom kept
pictures with that stuff. I dug
through her shelf this
morning—found a tintype and a few
daguerreotypes. One's of Great
Great Grandpa Henson. Thought you
might like it. Hang on, I'll send
you a side-by-side. You'll see.

STEVE

You found a picture? Thanks, Kel.
That'd be something.

KELLY (V.O.)

Yeah. You two look the same. It's
kinda freaky to tell you the truth.
Honestly—twins. I'll text it.

STEVE

(chuckles)

Alright. Send it.

KELLY (V.O.)

Okay. And Stevie—keep that diary
safe. Grandpa would've wanted you
to have it. Call me if you want me
to run down more of that stuff.

STEVE

I will. Thanks for making sure.
Love you, man.

KELLY (V.O.)

Love you too. Bye.

The line goes dead.

Steve watches the screen drop into sleep mode, then nearly at
once his phone buzzes with a new message.

He taps it, Kelly's name, a single image attached.

He opens the photo.

On the left, a faded tintype of a man in a sun-wrinkled face,
square jaw, eyes narrow and steady.

Henson, as the diary's hand called him.

On the right, a recent shot Kelly must've taken from his Facebook: Steve at a Mountain Man convention, hat brim low, leather jacket, the same hard line to his mouth and the same slight tilt of the head.

They are the same.

Not similar in the way cousins are similar, but identical in the planes of bone and the set of expression.

The jaw, the nose, the arch of the brows, the way the left eye crinkles just so.

For a long second Steve forgets to breathe.

He lowers the phone and looks across the small kitchen.

The diary sits on the counter where he left it: its buckskin cover worn, edges smoothed by fingers that might have been Henson's or someone who knew him.

The morning light from the window pools on the leather.

He sets the phone beside it and, almost reverently, reaches out.

The cabin hums with everyday sounds—the kettle cooling, a distant tractor on the road—but everything narrows to the two objects on the counter: a photograph on glass and paper and the diary with its old, insistent voice.

He doesn't move to call Kelly back.

He lets the silence hold, and the uncanny likeness of those two faces watches him from the screen and the paper, as if waiting for him to decide what to do next.

EXT. PORCH — MORNING

Steve sets his fresh cup on the rail, pulls the diary onto his knee.

The cornfield beyond the yard is a low green sea; the air tastes of cold metal and roast coffee.

He opens to October 25, 1862.

HENSON (V.O.)
This morning I saddle with a weight
I can feel in my ribs.
(MORE)

HENSON (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The pale light comes slow and the
air bites small. I tie the packs to
Blue - saddle blanket, extra shirt,
a bit of rope, and a tin of
hardtack wrapped in oiled cloth. We
shall ride to Dakota City; they
call for men for the Nebraska
Cavalry to sit the river line. I
don't go for glory. I go because
the sheriff says we must look to
one another and I am a man that
can't sleep with a thought in my
head.

The family stands near the gate.

Pheobe's hands won't be still.

She keeps smoothing her apron like she might iron the worry
out of it.

Arthur looks like he has swallowed the sun and tries hard not
to show it.

Hannah holds her kerchief and her chin.

Andrew and Henry try to be businesslike and wind up laughing
at nothing.

Loren keeps coming round my knees and then backing off as if
he cannot wholly trust me.

HENSON

(looking each in the face)

Arthur - you'll keep the fence
mended and see the oxen fed. If
anything more than a fence breaks,
you come to the house first, then
to the neighbors. Don't go off
alone after dark.

ARTHUR

(stiff, nodding)

I'll see to it, Pa.

HENSON

Hannah - look after the bees and
the east stand. Smoke slow in the
mornings, don't frighten the boxes,
and if the girls need help move a
frame for them. Tell your Mom if
the hives swell or if you see more
wasps than usual.

HANNAH

(quiet, steady)

I will, Pa. I'll be careful.

HENSON

Andrew – you sweep the henhouse and feed the pigs. Don't let the cat in the seed house. Henry – you fetch water and stack the kindling proper. Loren – you keep close to your mother and tell her every secret you find.

LOREN

(solemn)

I will.

HENSON (V.O.)

I gave them the small orders a man gives his own – the trades that make a home work while he is gone. They were more than chores; they were a promise to be here when I come back. Pheobe moves forward then, takes my hand as if it were the dry part of a log. My coat smells of smoke and horse. I pull Loren up against me and he buries his face against my chest. I kiss Pheobe's forehead slow, so she might have the memory of more than a goodbye.

HENSON

(soft)

Be good to each other. Mind the neighbors. I'll write when I can.

PHEOBE

(steady, voice small)

Bring your boots back, Henson.

HENSON (V.O.)

I lift into the saddle. Blue snorts and paws the ground. The boys shout a small chorus – a song they think brave – and Arthur stands there, shoulders squared like he has become another man's measure. I give Pheobe one last look, the light catching in her hair, and then I put my heels to Blue. We roll down the lane, the field beating past.

(MORE)

HENSON (V.O.) (CONT'D)
They stand until I pass the far
sump of corn. Past the last fence,
I look back once and the house is a
square of smoke and white. Then the
road folds the day like a map and I
ride toward the enlistment center,
toward men I do not yet know,
toward a thing I hope will be done
and done rightly.

EXT. STEVE'S CABIN - DAY

Steve closes the diary with a soft thumb.

He lets his coffee go cool at his lip and looks up from the
leather to the cornfield beyond.

The rows are ordinary and endless and not at all the path
Henson rode, but for a moment the farmhouse in his head is
full of people waving him away.

He watches the wind lift the tassels and for a second he
hears a distant hoofbeat that is not there.

EXT. SANTEE SIOUX NATION - POW-WOW GROUNDS - DAY

Drums roll low and steady in the center ring.

Colorful regalia spins and folds beneath sunlight; smoke from
a few small fires drifts sweet and gray.

Families and visitors thread between booths selling beadwork,
frybread, ribbon shirts - a public pow-wow, open to everyone.

Steve's tepee is set up on the edge of the ring.

A simple table in front holds bundles of sweetgrass neatly
tied; a small handwritten sign, a stack of business cards.

He's trying to be unobtrusive, offering braid bundles to
passing visitors.

The air smells of sweetgrass, frying oil, and wood smoke.

A small group of Santee men stop at the table.

They are polite at first, inspecting the sweetgrass, asking a
few practical questions about braid length and harvest.

MAN 1
(soft, courteous)
Where you get this from, brother?

STEVE

I grow it and I braid it myself.
Good for smudging, keeps the house
sweet.

A giant man – at least 6'7", broad-shouldered, face lined
with years – steps forward.

He's quiet, his presence like a tree blocking the sun.

GIANT MAN

(showing no smile)
You Wiseman?

Steve, handing over a card to another visitor, looks up and
blinks.

STEVE

(stammers)
Uh–yeah. Steve Wiseman. Why?

The giant man's jaw tenses.

He takes the business card in his big hands, eyes flicking to
the name, then to Steve's face.

His expression hardens; something like a muscle tightens in
his neck.

GIANT MAN

(quiet, controlled)
We don't much like that name around
here.

STEVE

(confused)
I'm sorry–did I do something? I
didn't mean to offend. I–I'm just
sellin' sweetgrass.

The giant man doesn't elaborate.

He steps back, the rest of the small group exchanging
glances.

Their tone remains polite, but the warmth has gone out of it.

Someone else offers a curt, "We're good," and they move on,
leaving Steve with the card in his hand and a sudden hollow
feeling.

Steve tries to steady himself, finishes folding his remaining
braids and takes down the tepee as the afternoon sun leans
toward evening.

The pow-wow continues around him, but a quiet knot has settled at the base of his skull.

INT. STEVE'S TRUCK — DUSK

Steve is on the highway, the reservation behind him.

The pow-wow's drums are a fading echo in his head.

He pulls his phone from the cup holder and dials Kelly.

KELLY (V.O.)

Hey? How'd it go? You survive the
Pow-wow?

STEVE

(sighs)

Yeah. Sold a few. But,
Kel-something weird happened. A big
guy saw my business card, saw
"Wiseman," and got... cold. Like I
walked into a room and everyone
stopped breathing. I had no idea
why.

KELLY (V.O.)

You read any more of the diary?

STEVE

A little. Read about Henson leaving
for the cavalry. Why?

KELLY

Listen—keep reading. Seriously. I
did a little digging while you were
at the tepee. Old newspapers, land
records, some local history
boards—Henson Wiseman's name shows
up in a few things. Not just
enlistment lists. There's mention
of a posse and land claims in the
same area where the Santee were
being pushed around back then.

STEVE

(angry, disbelief)

What? No. That can't be—Henson was
just a farmer, a homesteader.

KELLY

I know how that sounds. Look, I'm
not saying the whole story's
simple.

(MORE)

KELLY (CONT'D)

But there are enough threads I think you'll want to read it all-careful. I sent you a couple of links. Read the entries from July 1863. It might explain why folks were tense when you showed up today, but I recommend you just read the diary. It probably has a lot of info we don't know about.

STEVE

(voice low)

Okay. I'll go through it. Thanks for looking, Kel.

KELLY (V.O.)

Don't tell anyone yet. Read. Call me after. Be careful, man.

STEVE

I will.

He hangs up but keeps one hand on the wheel.

The highway stretches on, dusk flattening the fields to dark green bands.

His knuckles are a little white.

The diary sits on the passenger seat, closed but heavy as if it had weight beyond its paper.

The truck passes a cornfield, then another.

Headlights rise ahead.

Steve stares out at the ribbon of road and the distance beyond it, the phone dim in his lap, and the diary like a heartbeat at his side.

The engine hums; the highway carries him forward.

INT. STEVE'S CABIN - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Steve drops his keys on the hall table, shakes the dust from his jacket, and slides into his favorite chair.

The house smells faintly of frying oil and camp smoke, the last of the pow-wow still humming in his ears.

He sets the diary open on his knee, turns to the next entry, and reads.

The page begins with a neat date: October 28th, 1862.

FLASHBACK - EXT. DAKOTA CITY, NEBRASKA - ARMY ENLISTMENT
STATION - DAY

A makeshift lot by the river, churned to mud by hooves and boots.

Rough-cut boards form a table beneath a canvas awning.

Rows of men stand waiting, coats spattered with prairie dust; some laugh to hide nerves, others stare at their boots. Horses are hitched close, nostrils flaring.

The air tastes of grease, leather, and something like iron.

EXT. COMPANY I, 2ND NEBRASKA CAVALRY - DAKOTA CITY, NEBRASKA
- OCTOBER 28, 1862

At the table two Union soldiers take turns calling men forward and scratching names on a roll.

One is all business - barked questions, quick pen.

The other looks tired and suspicious of everything not nailed to the table.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
(calling)
Next!

A boy steps up, face still soft with youth, SAMUEL ST. CLAIR
(18).

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER (CONT'D)
Name?

SAMUEL ST. CLAIR
Samuel Robert St. Clair.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Age?

SAMUEL ST. CLAIR
Eighteen.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Where born?

SAMUEL ST. CLAIR
Hartington, Nebraska.

The soldier sizes him up like he's reading a card.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Height?

SAMUEL ST. CLAIR
Five seven.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Complexion? Eyes? Hair? Occupation?

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER (CONT'D)
(light, routine)
Light.
Blue. Blonde. Farmer.

Samuel nods, swallows, and is sent to the pile of uniforms to the side.

He walks off with his head high and a new brevet of purpose.

The line shuffles.

When Henson reaches the table there is nothing dramatic about his walk – steady, neither quick nor slow.

Men glance: he is older than most here, the face of a man who has seen more seasons than the prairie gives average souls.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER (CONT'D)
Name?

HENSON
Henson Wiseman.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Age?

HENSON
Forty-four.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Where born?

HENSON
Harrison County, West Virginia.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Height?

HENSON
Six foot.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Complexion?

HENSON
(dry)
Dark.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Eyes?

HENSON
Dark.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Hair?

HENSON
Dark.

ENLISTMENT SOLDIER
Occupation?

HENSON
Farmer.

The soldier nods, barely looking up from his papers, and marks Henson down.

He slides a folded uniform across the table – blue wool creased and smelling faintly of mothball and the government's supply.

U.S. UNION SOLDIER
Step to your right. Grab your
uniform and supplies.

Henson takes the bundle with both hands like it is more promise than cloth.

The second soldier gives a curt instruction about where to line up for inspection, and Henson moves along the row of men gathering their issued coats, belts, and haversacks.

As he passes, a few of the younger recruits offer nods of half-respect; a man near the back mutters something about an "old man going to war," and another claps Henson on the shoulder with a gruff laugh that's more nervous than friendly.

Henson returns the gesture with an even hand and an even face.

He feels the weight of the uniform settle in his arms, not yet worn, but already carrying the shape of the road ahead.

HENSON (V.O.)

I took the coat and the belt and
thought of Pheobe. I thought of
Hannah with the bees and Arthur
with a plumb line at the fence. I
thought of the boys with their
small songs. I thought that a man
leaves his house like a thing laid
down and he hopes it will be there
when he returns.

He moves on down the line, shoulders fitting the new fabric
as though an old skin were being traded for one meant to hold
a sharper world.

The camera lingers on the uniform between his hands – blue
against prairie light – then follows Henson as he falls into
the small, strange brotherhood forming in the dirt.

INT. STEVE'S LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

Steve lowers the diary and exhales.

The room around him is ordinary: photo frames, a lamp, a mug
with a lipstick crescent on the rim. But the page he just
read presses against the back of his teeth like a new fact he
can't swallow.

He thinks of the uniform, the enlistment table, the tiny,
bureaucratic way a man becomes part of history.

Steve himself a former soldier for the United States Marine
Corps.

He glances at the photograph on his mantel of him in his
Marine Corps Dress Blues, at Kelly's text already open in his
phone, at the sweetgrass braid folded in the corner.

Outside, the night is quiet.

Steve rubs at his forehead and flips the diary to the next
page, as if more of Henson's life might explain the
stranger's glare at the pow-wow and the sudden sense that the
past has literal weight in the present.

INT. STEVE'S LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

Steve's lamp throws a warm circle over the couch.

He stares at the diary on his lap, thumb running the edge of
a page.

His phone buzzes on the coffee table.

He glances: a text from Kelly with a single line and a link.

KELLY (TEXT)
Click this. Read it.

Steve taps the link.

A historical page opens: Mankato executions – December 26, 1862.

His eyes move down the screen.

As he reads aloud, the words bleed into memory and the past reconstructs itself.

STEVE (V.O., READING)
10:00 A.M., December 26, 1862 –
U.S. Military Executions in
Mankato, Minnesota.

FLASHBACK – EXT. MANKATO, MINNESOTA – MORNING – DECEMBER 26, 1862

A harsh November light brightens a wide town square.

Built timber scaffolds dominate the center – a vast platform ringed with heavy beams and thirty-eight nooses hung like dark fruit along the outer edge.

SUPER: 10:00 A.M. – DECEMBER 26, 1862

Rows of Union Army soldiers form a tight barrier around the scaffold – two ranks on foot, a third of cavalry mounted.

A long, deliberate corridor cuts through their lines to a stair leading up to the platform.

Thousands of townspeople press into the streets: men with folded coats, women clutching scarves, children craning their necks.

Drums beat a measured roll.

A banner in the town square reads nothing, but the occasion needs no sign.

Soldiers march a chain of thirty-eight prisoners along the walkway.

Each prisoner wears a rough white hood; their hands are tied.

They are silent but for the scrape of boots and the soft, steady breathing of the column.

The crowd murmurs, and the murmur grows teeth.

CAPTAIN WILLIAM DULEY (43) stands on the platform, older and lined, his beard shot through with gray.

He directs the preparations with a soldier's blunt efficiency.

Nearby, men work the ropes, slipping nooses over necks.

Shouts erupt from the crowd – some calls of approval, some edged with something darker.

SPECTATOR #1
Who's on hangman duty?

SPECTATOR #2
Captain Duley.

SPECTATOR #3
He volunteered.

A rumor ripples: the captain lost children in a raid.

The crowd barks its old grief back at the scaffold.

Captain Duley steps forward and addresses the prisoners with a voice made for order.

CAPTAIN DULEY
You have been found guilty of participating in attacks upon civilians. On order of the President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, you are to be executed.

The prisoners begin a low song – a Sioux melody that threads the square and refuses the soldiers' demand for silence.

The drums stop; even the wind seems to hold.

Duley walks to the main support rope.

A soldier stands by with an axe.

The platform's last restraints are released.

With a single sweep the rope is cut and the platform drops away.

The thirty-eight men fall.

For an instant the air is full of motion: bodies swing, some stilled more quickly than others.

The crowd's noise collapses into stunned hush.

After a measured time the soldiers move forward, cut the bodies down, and carry them away.

EXT. MINNESOTA RIVER - LATER

In a shallow bend of the river, soldiers dig and bury the bodies on a sandbar, moving with the routine carefulness of men making a grim chore final.

On the opposite bank, hidden in the brush, a small band of Sioux warriors watch the soldiers at the river.

Mato - young, hair long, a headband tied across his forehead - presses his hand to his mouth and weeps. Beside him stands Chatan - tall, muscular, like a tower of tense muscle - watching the burial with a face like a stone.

MATO

(subtitled, whisper)

We must tell my father what we saw today.

They withdraw silently, melt into the grass, mount their horses, and ride away - men carrying the sight of the square and the smell of the river with them.

INT. STEVE'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Steve lowers the phone.

The room is suddenly much smaller.

He scrolls through the article: the history, the numbers, the names.

The words on the screen feel like stones dropped into the pond of his life, ripples reaching out to the teepee, to the tepid smiles at the pow-wow, to the giant man's clenched jaw when he read "Wiseman" on a card.

He runs a shaking hand through his hair and stares at the diary on his knee.

Outside, a distant dog barks and the house hums.

Kelly's text sits in the thread above the link: Read it.

Steve realizes he's been reading long enough that the night has deepened around him.

He taps a reply.

STEVE (TEXT)
I'm reading. Jesus.

He puts the phone down, opens the diary again, and stares at the page until the letters blur.

INT. STEVE'S KITCHEN – NIGHT

Steve pads into the kitchen, flips on a small light, and wipes his hands on a dish towel. His phone rings.

He answers.

STEVE
(into phone)
Hello?

CLEVE (V.O.)
Steve? This is Cleve. I'm in-charge
of the pow-wow here at the Santee
Sioux Nation. You still there?

STEVE
Yes sir. Hey. How can I help?

CLEVE (V.O.)
We were talkin' about tepees.
Maya—my granddaughter—she used to
handle the setup every year. She...
passed two months ago. We been
trying to figure out who can take
it on.

Steve presses the phone to his ear, his face softening.

STEVE
I'm real sorry, sir. I didn't know.
I'm—I'm sorry for your loss.

CLEVE (V.O.)
Thank you. It's been hard. The pow-
wow's tradition, you know? Folks
ask for her hands when it's time to
raise the tents. She loved it.

STEVE

(quiet)

Listen—if it helps, I can bring up
six of my tepees and set 'em up
free of charge. I'll come up, put
'em up before the pow-wow, and when
you're done just call and I'll come
take 'em down and bring them back.

A beat. Steve waits, unsure how Cleve will take the offer.

CLEVE (V.O.)

(astonished)

You'd do that? For free?

STEVE

Yep. No charge. I know how to set
them proper. I got a trailer and
the ropes and stakes — I'll handle
the sweat. Consider it a favor.

CLEVE (V.O.)

(voice thick, then
laughing softly)

Steve... you surprise me. Folks don't
give things away like that much no
more. Why you want to do it?

STEVE

(shrugging)

No reason special reason. I want to
help. And—well—my schedule's open.
I can be there.

CLEVE (V.O.)

(quiet)

She would have liked that. She took
pride in every canvas. Folks will
be grateful. I don't know what to
offer you.

STEVE

Just make sure someone saves me
some frybread, sir. And a spot by
the fire so I can learn a thing or
two from whoever's running it now.

CLEVE (V.O.)

(chuckling)

Frybread's a good currency.
Alright, Steve. Here's what we'll
do: the pow-wow's in three weeks.
Can you make it the morning before?

(MORE)

CLEVE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
We'll meet at the grounds at eight.
Bring whatever you need.

STEVE
Eight's good. I'll bring six
tepees. I'll have 'em up before
noon.

CLEVE (V.O.)
(soft)
Thank you. Truly. Maya would've
been proud. If you hadn't offered,
I don't know who would've. I-my
family thanks you.

STEVE
No problem, sir. It's the least I
can do.

CLEVE (V.O.)
One more thing—can I give you the
best spot for your table? Near the
entrance. Folks will see your
sweetgrass.

STEVE
That'd be great. Appreciate it.

CLEVE (V.O.)
Steve... what you did today—this
means a lot. I'll see you in three
weeks. And Steve?

STEVE
Yeah?

CLEVE (V.O.)
Come say a prayer at the opening
for Maya. Help us remember her.

STEVE
I will. I'll be there.

They exchange a few quick logistics — his trailer size, where
to meet, contact number — then the call winds down.

CLEVE (V.O.)
May the spirits keep you safe, my
friend.

STEVE
You too, sir. See you soon.

Steve ends the call, sets the phone down, and presses his palms together for a moment, a small smile and a weight of something like peace on his face.

He looks toward the living room where the diary rests and then out the window toward the dark, empty field, as if deciding to turn an offer of help into a promise he means to keep.

INT. STEVE'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Steve sits with the diary open on his knee.

He reads the next entry and the words carry him back.

EXT. CAMP RANGE - DAKOTA CITY - DAY

Twenty Nebraska Cavalrymen stand in a line, rifles shouldered.

Targets sit about fifty yards downrange, fluttering paper on wooden frames.

The air smells of powder and horse sweat.

CAPTAIN JOHN TAFFEE (40's), lanky, beard thick with dark brown, paces at the front in his Union blues.

He barks the commands crisply.

TAFFEE

Ready!

The men bring their rifles up.

TAFFEE (CONT'D)

Aim!

They steady on the targets.

TAFFEE (CONT'D)

Fire!

The volley cracks in near-perfect unison.

Smoke blooms from muzzles.

Most shots find paper; one nearly tears a perfect hole in a bullseye.

A beat.

The line turns to look at Henson.

Samuel, the young recruit, whistles low.

SAMUEL
Well I'll be — who put that one
through the middle?

He points at Henson.

SAMUEL (CONT'D)
Was that you, mister?

Captain Taffee steps forward, curious and pleased.

TAFFEE
You there — name?

HENSON
Private Henson Wiseman, sir.

TAFFEE
That's a damned fine shot, Private
Wiseman.

Henson tips his chin, avoiding the attention.

HENSON
Thank you, sir.

TAFFEE
Can you do it again?

HENSON
Again, sir?

TAFFEE
Same hole. Twice.

No hesitation from Henson.

He raps a cartridge in, cocks, shoulders, and fires.

The round almost joins the first.

The men exchange astonished looks.

Laughter and cheers break out.

SAMUEL
How about a third to make it show-
off official?

More laughter. Taffee grins, impressed.

TAFFEE
What do you do to feed your family,
Wiseman?

HENSON
I farm, sir.

TAFFEE
A farmer who shoots like that?
Well I'll be.

He claps Henson on the shoulder, serious now, thinking ahead.

TAFFEE (CONT'D)
Listen – if we end up moving out, I
want you near me. You've got the
eye for a scout.

Henson frowns, cautious.

HENSON
If we move out, sir?

TAFFEE
Aye. Orders can change.

Henson exhales, relief and worry mixed.

HENSON
I thought we'd be watching the
homesteads along the river. That's
why I signed – to keep folks safe
at home.

TAFFEE
I know. We all signed hoping for
one thing and get given another.
That's the Army.

He softens and drops the formal tone.

TAFFEE (CONT'D)
Call me John. You're older than me
and you can shoot straighter than
most of the boys. Don't stand on
ceremony here.

HENSON
All right. John.

Taffee studies him.

TAFFEE
You hunted? Tracked much?

HENSON

Since I could walk. Know the country, know the Sioux round these parts.

TAFFEE

Good. Then you'll scout for me.

Henson's jaw tightens.

HENSON

I'm not eager to leave my family farther than I already have to. I joined to protect them, not to ride off hunting trouble.

TAFFEE

I don't need to lecture you on duty. I take orders same as you. Sometimes duty takes you where you didn't mean to go. There's no point fretting on it more than you must.

They fall into step, heading back toward camp.

HENSON

Can I ask you something else?

TAFFEE

Depends on the question. Some things I can't tell. Other things I won't.

HENSON

Why did this all start? The trouble up in Minnesota — what made the Sioux strike out like that?

Taffee hesitates, then decides to trust him.

TAFFEE

Keep this between us — understood?

HENSON

Understood.

TAFFEE

The simplest truth is poor handling and a heap of bad faith. The government promised annuities and supplies. The traders pressed the Sioux to accept credit through them instead, then refused to advance more without payment.

(MORE)

TAFFEE (CONT'D)
 Payments were late or redirected,
 food shipments sputtered. Folks
 starving, promises broken – people
 lost patience. That's the rough
 shape of it.

Henson absorbs that, not surprised but troubled.

HENSON
 So it's not all one side's doing.

TAFFEE
 No. It's messy. Perspective colors
 the story. I do what I'm told. You
 do what you're told. Both of us try
 to come through it without losing
 what matters.

They reach camp. Taffee straightens and reclaims the formal
 stance for appearance's sake.

TAFFEE (CONT'D)
 All right, Wiseman – back to
 calling me Captain until I tell you
 otherwise.

HENSON
 Yes, Captain.

They move among the tents and men, the quiet between them
 full of new purpose and old worry.

EXT. SIOUX VILLAGE – NIGHT

A circle of tepees crouches against the dark.

A low fire throws faces into relief – elders, warriors, a few
 women mending hides. Smoke curls up into the cold air.

At the place of honor, wrapped in a heavy wool blanket, sits
 INKPADUTA – Wahpekute war chief, hair long and dark, three
 feathers tucked at the back of his head.

Opposite him, also wrapped against the night, is his son
 Mato, taut with restlessness.

A few warriors sit nearby, listening.

They speak in Dakota; the lines are translated into English.

INKPADUTA
 (soft, measured)
 What troubles you, Mato?

MATO

(burning)

They hanged our people, Father.
Wapasha was among them. They strung
them up in front of the town and
the crowd cheered.

Inkpaduta's eyes do not flair; his voice is even but heavy.

INKPADUTA

We have been at war with the white
man as long as the stories say.
They take our land, break their
promises, steal what feeds us. That
will not end by shouting.

MATO

They have no honor. They take
everything—land, food, fathers,
children—and then they send us
away. I will not let Wapasha's
death stand unanswered.

INKPADUTA

(quiet, resolute)

How many more of our people will
you have killed for revenge? Their
armies grow. We protect what we can
by living, by keeping our people
safe.

MATO

Now is when they are spread thin.
Their soldiers are away. Their
settlements are weak. If we strike
now, we can hurt them where it
counts.

INKPADUTA

If it is only revenge you seek, I
will not give my hand. I will not
risk the lives of our people for my
grief. A leader must keep the
living.

MATO

(voice breaking)

Wapasha was like a son to you. You
taught him. Did his life mean
nothing?

INKPADUTA

His life means everything. Which is why I will not throw away others' lives to ease my sorrow. Violence begets violence, Mato. I have seen it too many times.

Mato stands abruptly, the blanket falling from his shoulders.

He turns to the small shadow of men who have kept watch at Mankato.

MATO

Then I will not wait for permission. I will not let the white man's rope be the last word. If the world wants to call us savages for defending our own, let them call us that.

CHATAN, a tall, solid warrior, steps closer.

CHATAN

There is a place near Yankton where the settlers are few. My family lives there; the men have gone with the army. It is a weak place.

MATO

Then that is where we will go. In the fall we will strike. We will make them remember Wapasha and ours.

Inkpaduta watches them a long moment, the flames reflecting in his eyes.

He says nothing more; his silence is an answer the men already understand.

Mato moves to the tied horses.

The others do likewise—Chatan and three more warriors, faces set like flint.

They mount without more words.

MATO (CONT'D)

(under his breath, to the night)

Tell my father I tried to stop it.

They ride off into the dark, silhouettes slipping away from the tepees, the fire slowly swallowing the sound of hooves.

INT. STEVE'S LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

Steve lets the diary fall closed on his lap.

The room is quiet except for the low hum of the refrigerator and the distant yard-light throwing a bar of pale color across the floor.

He sits very still, eyes fixed on the cover as if the leather might speak.

He remembers the white-hooded men on the scaffold, the names on the page – the Dakota, the song the prisoners sang – and the phone call with Cleve.

The image of inked names and of the Cleve's voice fold together in his head.

STEVE
(whispering)
Santee...

He taps the lamp, then reaches for his phone.

The pow-wow chief's number is still on the screen; Kelly's Wikipedia link is in the message thread.

He scrolls the article again, eyes catching the line: "Santee (Eastern Dakota) executions at Mankato."

The word feels like a hinge.

Steve sets the phone down without calling.

He presses his thumb into the diary's worn edge, thinking of the tepees stacked in his trailer, of the chief's granddaughter who used to set them, of the people in the book whose faces will never get a second chance.

He breathes out, a slow resolve settling in his shoulders.

The connection is no longer abstract history on a page – it's the people who come to the pow-wow, the chief on the line, the land they still walk.

He runs a hand over the sweetgrass braid on the mantel, then stands, diary in hand.

STEVE (CONT'D)
(to himself)
Okay. Do this right.

He lifts the diary under his arm and moves toward the hallway, a small light of decision behind him as he goes to prepare the tepees he'd promised.

EXT. SANTEE SIOUX NATION - POW-WOW GROUNDS - MORNING

A wide grass circle.

Flags and banners flap in a light wind.

Steve pulls his trailer into the lot, the six tepees bundled and stacked like sleeping beasts.

A small crew of volunteers - two young men from the Nation and a teenage nephew - help him unload.

CLEVE (60s), the pow-wow chief, wrapped in a wool blanket with a weathered face and gentle authority, meets him near the mark where the tepees will go.

He nods, points, speaks with steady calm.

CLEVE

(pointing)

We'd like three along the river side - facing in. Two by the fire. One by the elders' tepee. That's how Maya always set them.

STEVE

(loading a pole)

Got it. Three river, two fire, one elders. I'll start with the frames.

CLEVE

(smiles)

Thank you, Steve. My family appreciates you coming up.

They work.

Steve drives stakes, assembles lodge poles, pulls canvas over the frames.

The crew falls into an efficient rhythm - ropes tightened, smoke flaps arranged, colors smoothed.

Steve follows a practical order: the largest first, then the next, balancing space, sunlight, wind.

He becomes methodical, almost reverent, as if the motion matters more than the words.

As the last tepee is raised and pegged, a small cluster forms by the center fire.

Laughter and chatter die down; a hush moves through the circle like a breath exhaled.

Steve notices the stillness and walks over.

Near the fire, Cleve stands with three elders.

His shoulders are slumped.

Tears stain his cheeks.

He brings a hand to his mouth, trying to steady himself. The elders' faces are grave, eyes bright.

Steve halts, off-balance.

STEVE

(alarmed)

Chief Cleve—what's—did I do
something wrong with the placement?
Did I put one in the wrong spot?

Cleve looks up.

For a moment he cannot speak.

He wipes his face with the heel of his hand and forces a small, broken laugh.

CLEVE

You didn't do anything wrong. You
did...exactly as Maya always did.

STEVE

(confused)

Maya? I—Chief, I just followed what
made sense for wind and shade.

CLEVE

(shakes his head)

No. Not just practical sense. The
pattern, the colors — red by the
river, blue beside the fire, the
painted stripe on the southern pole
— she made it like that every year.
Everyone knew it. No one could have
guessed.

Elder LOUISA (60's) steps forward, voice soft but certain.

LOUISA

She had her way. She'd hum while
she set them, hum and point. Folks
say she lined them so the smoke
wouldn't bother the women cooking,
so the elders saw the sunrise. You
put them the same way.

STEVE

I swear I had no idea. I just set
them to be even. I didn't know
about any colors or- (searching) I
didn't know about Maya.

Another elder, a man named THOMAS (70's), studies Steve, then
exhales.

THOMAS

(quiet)

Sometimes the ones who leave show
us how to keep going.

Cleve's gaze fixes on Steve with an intensity that makes
Steve feel seen, exposed.

CLEVE

(soft)

It's like she reached out and
guided your hands. There's no way
you could know the- the order. No
way.

Steve opens his mouth to deny it more strongly, then closes
it.

He feels the diary's pages under his thumb in memory: the
hangings, the names, the phone call with Cleve.

His chest tightens.

STEVE

(low)

I read about...about the hangings. I
read in a book. Maybe that- maybe
that's why I felt like I should be
careful, like I should set them
respectful. I didn't know the
pattern. I didn't-

Before he can finish, a shadow cuts across the clearing.

A bald eagle, wings broad, glides low over the open field,
talons tucked.

Conversation stops mid-word.

Heads tilt back.

The bald eagle wheels overhead.

Then - Impossibly close -

It lands on the top of the tepee.

Talons clutching the painted pole, feathers ruffling in the wind.

A collective intake of breath - then silence so deep it hums.

Cleve lets out a sound that is part sob, part laugh.

He bends his head forward, then looks at Steve with wet eyes and a smile that trembles on the edge of wonder.

CLEVE

(whispering)

See? The old ones speak. The eagle comes.

Elder Louisa crosses herself with two fingers and raises a hand toward the sky.

LOUISA

(in Dakota, then to Steve)

They say an eagle is a messenger.
It carries prayers.

Steve stands very still, feeling the weight of everyone's gaze, feeling the diary like a stone in his pocket.

He remembers the names - the people buried on that sandbar - and the chief's granddaughter who used to set this same circle.

His rational explanations seem thin and fragile.

CLEVE

(earnest)

You were brought here, Steve. I don't know how, but Maya has her hands in this. The ancestors...they guided you. You did not come for nothing.

STEVE

(stammers)

I- I don't know what to say.

(MORE)

STEVE (CONT'D)
I didn't plan any of this. I just
wanted to help.

Cleve steps forward, places a hand on Steve's shoulder.

CLEVE
Then keep helping. Stay for the
opening. Stand with us. Sit with my
family tonight. If the spirits put
you here, you are welcome.

Steve swallows.

The eagle hunches, eyes bright, then lifts off again,
circling once and vanishing toward the river.

A wind runs through the tepee tops.

STEVE
(soft)
Okay. I'll stay.

Nearby, people begin to move again – quieter now, reverent.

Children point, elders exchange looks.

Cleve turns and calls softly for someone to get a blanket for
Steve.

The chief's eyes are steady with gratitude.

CLEVE
(quiet, to the circle)
We begin with thanks. For what we
have. For what returns to us.

Steve nods, palms suddenly damp.

He feels the diary's words in his chest, the old history and
the new meeting here like two rivers converging.

The moment hangs between the tepees and the river – fragile,
heavy, a strange kind of answer that leaves him less sure of
everything and somehow more certain of one small thing: he
will be present.

The space where the eagle was is empty now.

The drums continue.

Steve stands with the others, feeling quiet settle into him.

FADE TO BLACK.