

IN STRANGE WOODS

Episode #102 - "Dead Reckoning"

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with

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and

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READING GUIDE:

- Recorded 'tape' of interviews are indicated by indentation and character attribution
- Music, atmospherics, and sound effects are indicated by [brackets]
- Singing and rhythmic speaking are indicated by ALL-CAPS

EPISODE 2: DEAD RECKONING

PEREGRINE: (*Previous tape*): I wanted to know what it's like to be lost...really lost -- to see if we could survive what Jacob went through. 'Cause then it wasn't for nothing. It can't have been for nothing.

BRETT NARRATION: The Whitetail Forest in Northern Minnesota is a tangle of rock formations, freshwater lakes, and millions upon millions of trees. One wrong step will send you deep into a thick expanse of greenery that looks terrifyingly the same in every direction.

In navigation, "Dead Reckoning" is the process of tracking your position relative to landmarks you pass along the way. In other words, it's knowing where you are by knowing where you've been. Lose track of where you've been, and you'll end up somewhere completely unexpected.

DONALD (*on the phone*): Listen, Brett, the stories I could tell you... The stories everybody's got about this guy... What does Howland want with our kids? He thinks he got away with Jacob, but I know better. I should've known months ago, I felt like a damn fool when I got the call... But that is not happening again.

BRETT NARRATION: When I talked to Donald Van Calcar on December 16th, he was pissed.

A few days earlier, he had discovered what some folks already knew-- that his son, John Francis, had been spending afternoons and weekends training for a survival challenge in the middle of the Whitetail National Forest with his cousin, Peregrine Wells, three other classmates, and a man they called Howl.

Donald found out about it the way every parent fears-- with a phone call from the hospital.

[OPENING UNDERSCORE BEGINS]

That call sent him off on a search not so different from the one I had been on; who was Peter Howland really and what was his interest in these teens? What exactly did the other adults of Whitetail think was going on? And what would they do when they found out the truth?

I'm Brett Ryback and this is "In Strange Woods." Chapter 2: "Dead Reckoning."

A week before Donald got that phone call from the hospital, and a few days before he called me to "see what I really knew," his son John Francis was stretching his legs against a fallen tree in a clearing a few hundred feet from Howl's cottage.

[MUSIC -- "SHATTER"]

It's a chilly December day in Minnesota, but training for Peregrine's survival test, "The Final," is right on track. Strength, agility, endurance -- all the things they'll need when they get themselves purposefully lost in the Whitetail Forest.

[THE TEENS TRAINING OUTSIDE]

GROUP: OH, OH, OH...

PEREGRINE: (shouting): Get it going, JF! Four reps, three sets then pass the stick-- Show 'em how it's done!

ALL: (shouted)

ONE!

PEREGRINE: (sung)

FEEL THE ROOTS

FEEL THE RUSH IN YOUR BODY WHEN YOU

ALL:

TWO!

PEREGRINE:

BURST UP

FEEL THE POWER IN YOUR CORE

ALL:

THREE!

PEREGRINE:

STAY LOOSE

FEEL THE WIND FLOWING THROUGH YOU WHEN YOU

ALL:

FOUR!

PEREGRINE:

BREAK DOWN, TAKE EVERY WEAKNESS DOWN TO THE FLOOR

ALL:

PUSH INTO THE FEAR UNTIL IT SHATTERS
BARRIERS BEWARE YOU'RE GONNA SHATTER

I'M MOVING THE GOAL UP
I'M CLIMBING UP EVERY WALL

JOHN FRANCIS:

I'M GIVING CONTROL UP
I'M WILLING TO TAKE THE FALL

ALL:

MAKE ANOTHER CRACK IT DOESN'T MATTER
NEVER GONNA STOP UNTIL WE SHATTER IT ALL

BRETT NARRATION: Throughout the training process, Peregrine has a clear right-hand-man in her cousin, John Francis.

BRETT: So what's the point of that particular exercise?

JOHN FRANCIS: It works a ton of muscles at once, so it's flexibility, strength, stamina. It's basically what we do at track practice...

BRETT NARRATION: John Francis was the best pole vaulter in the county two years in a row. He's got the build for it-- 6 foot 1, lean muscle. His skin is a light, pinecone-brown, and he might be the only kid in the group without a spot of acne. His track experience has helped prepare him for this training...

JOHN FRANCIS (CONT'D):

...you have to focus on really specific lifts and stretches... so when you go for the jump, you don't even have to think about it, you just-- you just *know* you can do it.

ALL:

MAKE ANOTHER CRACK IT DOESN'T MATTER
NEVER GONNA STOP UNTIL WE--

BRETT NARRATION: The strategy made sense-- vigorous preparations now, so the teens would be ready when they found themselves lost in the woods.

The hazier part was why they would agree to Peregrine's idea in the first place.

WOODSLEY: I was already pretty good at knot-tying and like knowing which berries were safe to eat 'cuz of boy scouts... Well, I mean technically I didn't go past cub scouts, 'cuz that's..cuz I didn't need to. So...I'm pretty -- yeah I'm pretty set.

BRETT NARRATION: Shane O'Connor has bright red hair that stands at attention with a boyband slickness. It's the only part of his appearance he seems to put any effort into. His cub scout pedigree earned him the nickname "Woodsley"... or at least that's how he remembers it.

[ERIC AND JF LAUGHING]

WOODSLEY: It's cuz I already knew the most foresty stuff!

JOHN FRANCIS: Yeah right!

WOODSLEY: It's true!

ERIC: Oh my God...

JOHN FRANCIS: Come on, man...

WOODSLEY: What??

ERIC: He was insisting that he was the expert on some tree or something, right?

JOHN FRANCIS: Yeah, and he was like, "I know what kind of spruce this is cuz I was in scouts and --

JOHN FRANCIS + ERIC: "I'm really woodsley!" (*they bust out laughing*)

WOODSLEY: I said WOODSY!

JOHN FRANCIS: Except you didn't... (*laughter continues*)

WOODSLEY: Shut up!

BRETT NARRATION: Woodsley's parents and his four, equally-freckled brothers are longtime family friends of Peregrine and her mother Kathy:

WOODSLEY: Well, there's Shannon, Seamus, Me, Sean and Shanley. I'm actually a year younger than the rest of "the Survivalists" cuz they're all in Seamus's grade... but nobody likes Seamus.

BRETT NARRATION: You might remember Woodsley's mom, Irene O'Connor.

IRENE: (previous tape): It's just the hardest part of the job tryna get them to put those phones down!

BRETT NARRATION: She was a chaperone at prom the night Peregrine's brother Jacob went missing. While Jacob was lost, the O'Connor men searched alongside the community team for three long days while Irene spent hours on the phone with Kathy Wells.

ALL:
(Group Oh's)

PEREGRINE: There it is! Way to dig in, Woodsley!

WOODSLEY: Hell yeah!

PEREGRINE: Alright Eric, let's go!

PEREGRINE:
DODGE!

ALL:
EVERY BRANCH
EVERY ROCK

PEREGRINE:
NOTHING HURTS IF YOU CAN--

ALL:
SPRINT!
BURST OUT!

PEREGRINE:
PRESS THE PAIN AND MAKE IT NUMB

ALL:

STRIKE!

PEREGRINE:

LEFT! RIGHT!

ALL:

LEFT! RIGHT!

PEREGRINE:

RISE ABOVE IT WHEN YOU--

ALL:

DROP!

PEREGRINE:

DROP DOWN INTO THE BEAST THAT YOU BECOME

ALL:

PUSH INTO THE FEAR UNTIL IT SHATTERS
BARRIERS BEWARE YOU'RE GONNA SHATTER

ERIC & WOODSLEY:

I'M MOVING THE GOAL UP
I'M CLIMBING UP EVERY WALL
I'M GIVING CONTROL UP
I'M WILLING TO TAKE THE FALL

ALL:

MAKE ANOTHER CRACK IT DOESN'T MATTER
NEVER GONNA STOP UNTIL WE SHATTER IT ALL

PEREGRINE: One more set, Eric, you're not done yet, let's do it!

ERIC: (*panting*) Whyyyyyyyyyy...

PEREGRINE: Let's do it!

ERIC: Okay fine!

BRETT NARRATION: Eric was enlisted into the group by John Francis when Howl needed repairs done on his roof.

ERIC: I was in shop class with John Francis second semester and he asked if I wanted to help with the roof. I guess he saw I was pretty good at handiwork. Honestly, I was just surprised he was talking to me.

BRETT NARRATION: Eric is slim, with sandy-white skin and bright blue eyes. He's gay, and he's out -- something that would have been

unthinkable for me when I used to vacation here with my family over a decade before Eric was even born.

ERIC: Even when Howl has us work on stuff that we don't understand yet, you just stick with it cause it all adds up eventually. Things I didn't get at the beginning are starting to click now.

BRETT: Like what?

ERIC: Like... the Rule of 3's.

WOODSLEY: Yeah, love the Rule of 3's... there's- the...tell him, Eric!

ERIC: So, it's all about how you prioritize in a crisis. Just remembering these rules. So it's, you can go 3 minutes without air --

WOODSLEY: Yeah.

ERIC: 3 hours without shelter --

WOODSLEY: Mmhm.

ERIC: 3 days without water --

WOODSLEY: Yeah.

ERIC: 3 weeks without food --

WOODSLEY: Without food.

ERIC: And 3 months without hope.

WOODSLEY: That last one's weird.

BOYS SINGING:

I'M MOVING THE GOAL UP
I'M CLIMBING UP EVERY WALL
I'M GIVING CONTROL UP
I'M WILLING TO TAKE THE FALL

BRETT NARRATION: The three boys, John Francis, Woodsley, and Eric, have all excelled throughout the process. But for Peregrine's oldest

friend, Lexy, it's been a bit of a struggle. Sweat mats her curly bangs against her forehead as we talk.

LEXY: *(catching her breath)* I mean, it's really good exercise. And Peregrine wants us to succeed. So, um, I don't mind now that we're doing double sessions cause if it's gonna make a difference for the--

PEREGRINE (in the distance): Lexy, come on! You've got two more reps!

BRETT (to Lexy): We can pick this up later if--

LEXY: Umm, sure I--

BRETT: Or if you want to just finish your thought...

LEXY: Yeah, no... I just mean, we're all in it together. And like, that's what Peregrine wants, and she deserves that, from her friends. So if we keep getting stronger then we'll--

PEREGRINE (in the distance): Alexandra!!! Let's go!!

LEXY: *(shouting)* Hold on, I'm talking to Brett!! *(to Brett)*
Sorry...

BRETT: *(to Lexy)* No, it's fine. You go... I'll be here...

ALL:
PUSH INTO THE FEAR UNTIL IT SHATTERS
BARRIERS BEWARE YOU'RE GONNA SHATTER

LEXY
(short on breath)
I'M MOVING THE GOAL UP
I'M-- I'M CLIMBING--
I'M GIVING CONTROL--
I'M-- I'M-- I'M--

ALL:
MAKE ANOTHER CRACK IT DOESN'T MATTER
NEVER GONNA STOP UNTIL WE SHATTER IT ALL.

BRETT NARRATION: Watching The Survivalists train is impressive and strange. Seeing them throw themselves at the exercises, full body.

It's as though they're urging themselves to grow up, as fast as they can. To take some power back.

PEREGRINE (*in the woods*): Oh, we'll definitely be ready-- 'cuz we're all getting stronger and faster, together, as a unit. Even Howl can see it. He can tell we're different.

BRETT NARRATION: As a grown person, it's difficult for me to know how to feel about Peregrine's plan - to have Howl lead them deep into the woods, separate them, and leave them there overnight. They'll attempt to make their way home the next day without maps or GPS. It will be an enormously difficult undertaking. Dead reckoning will be one of the few tools they have to keep from simply going in circles.

I wondered what their parents thought about it. Were they really going to let their children put their own lives at risk in the same woods that had already taken Jacob?

KATHY: You want tea or anything, hun?

BRETT: Uh, no thank you, I'm good.

KATHY: You know I just got this eucalyptus tea from that...

BRETT NARRATION: Kathy has a comforting way about her. It speaks to her years as a registered nurse at St. Joseph's Hospital in nearby Cass Lake.

In Kathy Wells' living room there's a framed 8x10 photo of Peregrine and Kathy laughing, standing on either side of Jacob at an ice rink. He's wearing his hockey gear and a proud smirk. He towers over them.

KATHY: Well, the results are crystal clear. She feels like she can take on anything, she's confident again. And always smiling when she gets home.

BRETT: Why do you think it's having that effect on her?

KATHY: She's doing things she didn't know she could do before. It's a good distraction. And I'm sure just being outside with friends doesn't hurt.

BRETT NARRATION: As far as their parents knew, Peregrine and her friends were going out into the woods to learn some skills simply for the "what if." For the unplanned. Kathy had no idea the kind of

danger her daughter was actively creating for herself and her friends.

BRETT: And what does she say about Howland?

KATHY: Oh, she thinks the world of him. If he taught her some new trick to find water or to keep her heart rate low in a "dangerous situation." He's like a super scoutmaster, and she just thinks he's so cool. He's doing something right.

BRETT: Yeah-- so it sounds like he's pretty present with them the whole time that they're out there?

KATHY: Oh yeah, that's a must, I mean he's the expert, so he's with them all weekend, and most days after school... I can't say I completely understand why they have to be out there for so long, for so many days a week, but... I mean, heck, you've been out there with 'em, maybe you know something I don't.

BRETT NARRATION: Listening back to this, it sounds like an invitation from Kathy for me to tell her what was really going on out in the forest. About The Final.

[MUSIC -- "I KNOW THIS GIRL (PREPRISE 1)"]

BRETT NARRATION: In the moment, I froze. I hadn't expected to be the keeper of a secret in this story. I don't know if Kathy really was fishing, but in the end I decided it wasn't my information to share.

KATHY: I keep trying to remember though, and this is what Pastor Michael said too, he said I just need to remember to trust myself as a mother and trust Peregrine as my daughter...Because there is a sacred bond there...

SHE KNOWS RIGHT FROM WRONG.

AND SHE FOLLOWS THE RULES.

I GUESS YOU COULD SAY THAT WE'RE BUILT THE SAME WAY,

SINCE I GAVE HER THE TOOLS.

AND I KNOW THIS GIRL.

I KNOW THIS GIRL.

[FOREST ATMOSPHERE]

BRETT: I was talking to your mom the other day. I was surprised that you hadn't told her about "The Final" yet.

PEREGRINE: ...Did you--

BRETT: No, I didn't say anything.

PEREGRINE: Well, she knows we're training.

BRETT: To get lost in the woods on purpose?

PEREGRINE: I don't think she really needs to know that...

BRETT: What about the other parents?

PEREGRINE: Well, we agreed we wouldn't tell them. Not yet.

BRETT: 'Kay, so when are you gonna do it?

PEREGRINE: Well, I don't...she'd just like...get scared for no reason... But when she sees I can take care of myself in the woods, then she'll know she doesn't have to worry.

BRETT: You don't think she's gonna be mad?

PEREGRINE: Not mad, exactly... She should understand. Of all people, she should understand.

BRETT: How come?

PEREGRINE: She lost Jacob, too, didn't she?

BRETT NARRATION: The truth is Howl wasn't always around. Most of the training by this point was being led by Peregrine.

The first day I went to observe them, about two weeks before I got that pissed off call from Donald Van Calcar...

DONALD (on the phone): ...see the thing is there's shit they ain't telling you Brett, even you...

BRETT NARRATION: ...I hadn't seen Howl all morning. Apparently, he had been out on a solo hunt.

[SOUNDS OF THE KIDS HANGING OUT, THEN THE KIDS RECEIVING HOWL AND THE DEER, GETTING THEIR TOOLS.]

BRETT NARRATION: When I finally saw him approaching in the distance, his broad silhouette looked otherworldly. He was dragging a dead deer on a sled behind him. As he got closer, the kids sprung into action, perfectly choreographed...

[SOUND FROM THE BUSINESS OF GUTTING THE DEER CONTINUE THROUGH SECTION, PEREGRINE LEADING.]

PEREGRINE: It's a doe, Eric can you...

ERIC: Yeah, I've got it.

WOODSLEY: I'll get another bucket.

LEXY: There's a clean one under the bench.

WOODSLEY: Yeah, on it!

BRETT NARRATION: The gutting of the animal was methodical and reverent.

Howl stood at the door of his cottage and watched them work; a proud general observing his troops.

Somewhere between the opening of the deer's chest cavity and the removing of its esophagus, I started feeling lightheaded. I didn't have the same training as these teens.

I could sense Howl watching me in that moment-- squatted, wobbling in my bulky headphones, field recorder shoved between the kids and the deer.

Howl stepped inside to wash up. I stopped recording for a few minutes and let them work.

[THE SOUNDS OF THE DEER GUTTING FADE AWAY AS BRETT INTERVIEWS LEXY OUTSIDE]

LEXY: Peregrine really pushes us. She's always been pretty headstrong when she's into something. And like, that's fine or whatever, but... I don't know... You know when people tell you they're doing something for your own good, but it actually feels like it's just for them? I don't know, maybe I'm just really tired.

BRETT NARRATION: When Lexy talks about what they've been through I feel like I arrived in Whitetail too late. I wish I could have seen Howl interact with the kids in the beginning, before they had become so independent. Difficult to know how they got there without a sense of the landmarks along the way. No chance for dead reckoning.

DONALD (on the phone): ...So what's the plan exactly? Lure some teenage girl into his hut and then convince her to bring all her friends into this death trap in the woods?

BRETT NARRATION: I could see where Donald Van Calcar was coming from. Even from the inside I felt I was missing something -- something that would explain Howl's investment in these kids.

DONALD (CONT'D): Look, and I don't know how deep you've looked into this, but that property he's been running his little cult out of? That was the Pulnik's family land. How did he even get that land? See these are the questions you need to be asking, Brett.

BRETT NARRATION: The reality was that without speaking to Howl, none of the parents would know who he really was. All they'd see was this strange man who had found Jacob Wells' body, allegedly by chance. The man who now had their kids coming to his house in the woods week after week, preparing for a survival challenge administered at his hand.

So that evening, I decided to go back to the source.

[BRETT ENTERS HOWL'S COTTAGE, LUGGING EQUIPMENT. A FIRE CRACKLES IN THE FIREPLACE]

BRETT: Hi! Thank you.

HOWL: Yeah.

BRETT: Nice and warm in here.

HOWL: You don't travel lightly, do you.

BRETT: No...

BRETT NARRATION: The main living area in Howl's cottage is tidy. Spare and practical. A fireplace, a table, a few handmade chairs.

BRETT: I brought this for you, as a thank you.

HOWL: Hmm.

BRETT: I'm not much of a whiskey guy, but I thought this looked good.

BRETT NARRATION: It was unclear whether Howl is, himself, a whiskey guy, but what was clear was his distaste for my obvious attempt at buttering him up.

When I first interviewed him a few weeks earlier, he was guarded, but polite. At the time, I was primarily focused on his experience finding Jacob, and how he, Peregrine, and the other teens started training together.

But now I wanted to know more about him. His past. Something to help me understand his intentions. Where he was born, who his parents were. All things that, it was clear --

HOWL: What does it matter to you?

BRETT NARRATION: Howl does not want to discuss.

HOWL: Well, I knew when that boy showed up dead on my land there was gonna be some people come around. And they did. Asked me their questions. Wasn't anything to tell them other than what I told you. Mercifully, they stopped coming around. You will, too, I imagine.

BRETT NARRATION: He scrutinizes me from behind a pair of black, wire-framed glasses. His face is creviced and disapproving, made even more severe by the fact he wears his long gray hair pulled back tight in a ponytail.

HOWL: Life is disappointment. It affects you because you have the opposite expectation.

BRETT NARRATION: The one topic I can get him to talk about is his philosophy on survival.

HOWL: You expect everything should work out in your best interest. You're a good person, you deserve it. But nature doesn't care about your expectations. There is no good or bad. No pleading with nature. You have to be prepared.

BRETT: For what?

HOWL: All of it. Are you listening to me? If the worst thing were to happen to you - are you ready for it?

BRETT: What is the worst thing?

HOWL: You'll know it when it happens.

BRETT: Give me an example.

HOWL: All right. Let's say your car out there hits a patch of black ice and you careen off the road into the trunk of a sixty-foot spruce. Your nose is broken from the impact of the airbag and your brain is swelling from a minor concussion. What would you do?

BRETT NARRATION: This question catches me completely off guard.

BRETT: I don't know.

HOWL: Guess.

BRETT: I don't know. I'd call for help I guess.

HOWL: Everybody goes to their phone. Your phone isn't gonna save you. No service out here.

BRETT NARRATION: I begin to wonder exactly what Howl knows about me, and if this is a calculated inquiry.

BRETT: I'd get out and try to push the car -

HOWL: You have a brain injury. The exertion causes you to vomit, so now you've just lost fluids. And temperatures are starting to drop.

BRETT: I guess I have to wait 'til somebody finds me.

HOWL: *If* someone finds you.

BRETT: Sorry...this is...I don't know if you knew, but my parents died in a car accident, similar to that, when I was 13.

BRETT NARRATION: Did he know?

HOWL: Hm. So maybe you understand. What the worst thing is.

BRETT NARRATION: And here Howl pauses, his mind suddenly elsewhere. He stands and walks into another room. He returns a few seconds later with a key, which he uses to unlock a metal cabinet. He swings the rusty door open and removes a clear glass bottle, half-filled with a honey-colored liquid.

HOWL: You ever taste dandelion brandy?

BRETT: No.

BRETT NARRATION: He grabs two small, mismatched glasses and fills each with a decent pour.

BRETT: *(taking a drink)* Stronger than I expected.

HOWL: My own recipe.

BRETT NARRATION: So much for the whiskey. Howl sits, drinks, and then returns to lecturing me on his worldview for the next twenty minutes.

HOWL: ...but to never consider your death? Foolish! What did Marcus Aurelius say? You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do and say...

BRETT NARRATION: Eventually, I decide to try another tactic.

BRETT: So why these teens? Why agree to The Final?

HOWL: What does it matter to you?

BRETT: It matters to me because people have questions about you. Some people might even call what you're doing with these kids inappropriate.

[HOWL POURS HIMSELF ANOTHER GLASS.]

HOWL: Hm.

BRETT: Making them skin and gut animals, leaving them alone in the woods for hours on end, teaching them philosophies about death.

HOWL: Inappropriate.

BRETT: It's questionable behavior, at the very least --

HOWL: To teach somebody how to prepare themselves, to tell them the truth about the world?

BRETT: It could be. If they're a kid.

HOWL: I was a kid when I was sent to Vietnam. I found out the truth about the world then; nobody seemed to think that was inappropriate. We send kids to Afghanistan to fight a war against the same people we gave missiles to in the '80s. But teach those kids how to survive in nature, and suddenly that's inappropriate.

[HOWL FINISHES HIS GLASS. WE HEAR THE FOLLOWING ACTION AS BRETT DESCRIBES IT.]

BRETT NARRATION: Howl stands and moves back towards the open metal cabinet. He reaches in and pulls out a stack of photographs. He sits down and begins to lay them out in front of me.

[MUSIC - "SOMETHING SO PURE"]

HOWL: Here's what's inappropriate. Israel, 1969. Sudan, '71, civil war. 1973, Algeria, the Western Sahara.

BRETT NARRATION: Buildings in rubble. Expressionless, emaciated faces; frightened children, their eyes screaming out for help.

HOWL: Life is disappointment...

BRETT: Who took these?

HOWL:

HER NAME WAS GERDA.

WE MET IN CAIRO.

SHE WAS THE FRIEND OF A GIRL I DIDN'T KNOW.

Here we are on a beach in Alexandria.

WE TOOK A WEEKEND.

SHE HAD INSISTED.

AND AS I QUICKLY FOUND OUT

WHEN GERDA INVITES YOU, YOU GO.

BRETT: This is Gerda Pulnik. She used to be the owner of this property.

HOWL: Good research.

BRETT: Were you with her when she took these?

HOWL: Yes.

BRETT: They're so striking.

HOWL:

THERE WAS SOMETHING SO PURE, HOW SHE SAW THE WORLD
THROUGH THE EYE OF HER CAMERA LENS.
SHE'D FIND BEAUTY AND HOPE IN THE HEART OF DESPAIR.
WE LEFT SEEKING WAR
AND CAME BACK BEING MORE THAN JUST FRIENDS.

THERE WAS SOMETHING SO PURE, HOW SHE LOOKED AT ME.
LIKE HER GOODNESS MIGHT BE MY REPRIEVE.
I'D NEVER HAD FAITH IN FORGIVENESS OR GRACE,
BUT I'D LOOK IN HER EYES
AND HOWEVER UNWISE, I'D BELIEVE.

AND WE SAW KABUL AND CAPE TOWN AND GAZA.
WE SAW DESERTS THAT DANCED WITH THE SEA.
I FELT EAGER AND WANTED,
RAPT AND UNGUARDED AND FREE...

*[WAVES LAPPING THE BEACH. GULLS CRY. GERDA'S VOICE COMES IN AS A
MEMORY, AS IF ON A VINTAGE TAPE]*

GERDA:

PETER GO IN, THE WATER'S WARM!
(*Laughing*) NO, NO! DON'T GET THE CAMERA WET!
GIVE IT TO ME. DON'T MOVE, PETER...
HOLD STILL, I SEE YOU...DON'T MOVE...

[THE CLICK OF A CAMERA.]

BRETT: She was a war photographer.

HOWL: Photojournalist.

BRETT: What happened?

HOWL: What happened...

THERE IS NOTHING SO PURE IN THE HEART OF MAN
AS THE HUNGER FOR POWER AND GOLD.
A DECADE SURROUNDED BY CHAOS AND WAR
MADE THE PEACE THAT WE STOLE
BEGIN TO FEEL SOULLESS AND COLD.

[DISTANT BOMBING MOVES CLOSER AND CLOSER]

INSIDE ME AN ANGER WAS BORN AGAIN
FOR INJUSTICES I COULDN'T CURE.
I TRIED TO HOLD FAST TO THE LOVE THAT WE SHARED,
BUT THE DARKNESS WOULD COME
AND LEAVE NO ROOM FOR SOMETHING SO PURE.

AND WE SAW JUNTAS, CONTRAS, GUERILLAS.
WE SAW BLOODSHED, SCOURGE, AND DEBRIS.
I FELT ANXIOUS AND HAUNTED,
TRAPPED, AND I STARTED TO FLEE...

GERDA:

PETER SIT DOWN, LET'S TALK THIS OUT.
(Holding back tears.) NO, NO! WE ARE NOT FINISHED YET!
LISTEN TO ME. DON'T GO, PETER...
STAY HERE, I LOVE YOU...DON'T GO...

HOWL: *(Simultaneous)*

WHERE IN THE WORLD?
WHERE COULD I GO?
HOW FAR COULD I RUN TO LEAVE THIS BEHIND ME?

GERDA: *(Simultaneous)*

WHERE WILL YOU GO?
WHERE IN THE WORLD?
WILL YOU EVER COME FIND ME?

BOTH:

OR MUST I LIVE WITH THIS PAIN
FOR WHATEVER REMAINS
OF MY DAYS?

HOWL:

SHE DIED IN ISRAEL.

THERE WAS A BOMBING.

I GOT A LETTER INFORMING ME SO.

She had bequeathed me this house, this land.

I DIDN'T WANT IT.

I COULDN'T FATHOM...

BUT THEN I KNEW IN MY GUT

WHEN GERDA INVITES YOU, YOU GO.

BRETT NARRATION: I sat for a moment, overwhelmed by the glimpse I'd been given into Peter Howland's soul. Suddenly, he wasn't some sociopath living on the edge of society, festering with evil intentions. He was a man who'd seen the worst of humanity and was trying desperately to save himself from it.

He picked up the photographs and walked back toward the other room. I started packing up my things. That's when I realized I had a voicemail from Irene O'Connor, Woodsley's mom. She sounded frantic-- she had just learned about something called "The Final."

That's after the break.

[ADVERTISING BREAK]

IRENE (on the phone):

Ya know, you try to make sure they do their homework, they go to church, they eat a vegetable once in a blue moon, but then out of nowhere, you just hear something like this, and you wonder "why bother!"

BRETT NARRATION: I called Irene back the morning after my night with Howl.

BRETT: I'm happy to help fill in some blanks if I can; what exactly have you heard?

[MUSIC - "IRENE AFTER DENTIST"]

IRENE: Well, I've heard what I was told!

I WENT TO THE DENTIST, WAS JUST FOR A CLEANING,
BUT THEY SHOULD CALL THAT PLACE THE WHITETAIL GAZETTE

CAUSE DR. DEKOENIG, HIS DAUGHTER IS LEXY,
SAID THAT HE--

DECLAN: (*Off-mic*): What now? What do you want??

IRENE: (*shouting back*) No, I'm talking to Brett!

DECLAN: Okay!

IRENE:

LIKE I WAS SAYING, THAT GOSSIPY DENTIST,
HE ASKS WHAT I THOUGHT OF "THE FINAL"

I SAID, "WHAT'S A FINAL?"

HE SAID, "NEVERMIND."

I SAID, "NEVERMIND?! YOU CAN'T LEAVE IT AT THAT!"

BUT RIGHT THEN,

AT THAT VERY MOMENT

HE OPENS MY MOUTH AND SHOVES IN HIS HANDS

RIGHT WHEN

I PUSH HIM FOR ANSWERS

HE BRUSHES ME OFF, SO I GO TALK TO PAM!

PAM IS HIS WIFE, SHE SETS THE APPOINTMENTS
AND VOLUNTEERS WEEKLY AT BASKETBALL GAMES
HELPS WITH CONCESSIONS, AND BRINGS--

DECLAN: He doesn't need to know all that!

IRENE: (*shouting back*) What??

BRETT NARRATION: That's Irene's husband, Declan, shouting from the
living room as per usual.

DECLAN: He doesn't need to know about her volunteering at high
school basketball games!

IRENE: No, he does, he *does* need to know that because that's
where she talked to Coach Fordham.

DECLAN: Who??

IRENE: Oh, you don't know how this works. Okay, as I -- what was
I saying? Oh!

SO PAM TALKS TO FORDHAM, THAT'S ERIC'S DAD FORDHAM,

HE'S BLABBING AT LENGTHS ABOUT "TRAINING"

SHE ASKS, "WHO'S IN TRAINING?"

HE'S NAMING THE NAMES

AND THEN HE'S EXPLAINING THE WHOLE WACKY PLAN.

HIS SON

AND ALL OF OUR BABIES

ARE RISKING THEIR LIVES FOR SOME KIND OF GAME

HIS UN-

DERSTANDING OF ALL OF IT

SEEMS TO RELY ON WHAT ERIC HAD CLAIMED

And with teenagers -- who knows if you're getting the whole truth!

BRETT: Well Eric's a good--

IRENE:

SO PAM IS BEWILDERED, SHE WANTS TO KNOW MORE

BUT COACH HAD TO RUN CAUSE HALF-TIME WAS THROUGH

NOW PAM'S ASKING ME TO INVESTIGATE FURTHER

WHILE I TRY TO BOOK AN APPOINTMENT FOR JUNE

BRETT: Ok, so--

IRENE:

JUNE'S LOOKING TOUGH, THEY'RE OUT FOR 3 WEEKS

TO VISIT PAM'S MOTHER IN DAYTON

SHE OFFERS LATE MAY

I SAY "OKAY GREAT"

WE MAKE THE APPOINTMENT AND THEN I CALL YOU.

I figure you spend enough time out there with those kids, you probably already knew all about this cockamamy idea, am I right?

DECLAN: (off mic) Colombo over here on the case!

BRETT: I have known about "The Final," yes, and the kids training. I'd be happy to play you some tape of what I've recorded out there, if you like, but I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind holding off on telling Kathy about it for now.

BRETT NARRATION: I wanted to get to Kathy first; I felt like I owed her that before news spread to her. And I felt guilty for not telling her earlier.

IRENE: Oh jeez, you sound just like her! So, I called her last night, and all she seemed to care about was whether or not I had told Donald yet.

BRETT NARRATION: Oh, boy. In what world did I think I was going to beat Irene O'Connor to the punch on spreading gossip?

IRENE: She wanted to "get the whole story," she said from Peregrine before Donald could get involved. I don't know what she thinks she's missing, but fine, if that's what she wants to tell him, she can tell him. That's fine with me.

BRETT: Okay, so it sounds like you were maybe able to fill in some more of the details after you left the dentist?

IRENE:

WELL, AFTER I CALLED YOU AND YOU DIDN'T ANSWER
I WENT TO THE PIC 'N SAVE JUST FOR A TREAT
CAUSE CLEANINGS ARE STRESSFUL, I FELT LIKE I EARNED IT,
I PICKED UP A SNICKERS AND WHO DO I MEET?

BRETT: Lexy...

IRENE: You're good!

RIGHT THERE
RESTOCKING BANANAS,
I ASK HER ONE THING AND SHE'S TELLING ME TEN
RIGHT WHERE
MY KNOWLEDGE HAD ENDED
SHE'S PICKING IT UP WITH THE WHO, WHAT, AND WHEN
CLEARLY SHE WANTED TO VENT,
WITH OR WITHOUT MY CONSENT,
BUT THEN I KNEW MORE THAN I WOULD'A BEFORE
IF I HADN'TA WENT TO THE
DEN-
TIST.

BRETT NARRATION: Tail between my legs from my conversation with Irene, I went to see Kathy, knowing what she now knew. I caught her at home while Peregrine was at school.

KATHY: Can I get you anything, hon? Tea? Hot cocoa?

BRETT: I'm okay.

BRETT NARRATION: Even when she was upset, hospitality was in her bones. She sat across from me in her nursing scrubs.

[MUSIC - "I KNOW THIS GIRL (PREPRISE 2)"]

KATHY: I feel, uh... I feel stupid. Yeah. I'm guessing you already knew about this whole "Final" thing-- I'm not mad. I'm not mad at you. You don't owe me anything, I don't expect you to... It just, um...y'know it just doesn't feel good when you're the last one who knows something, y'know?

BRETT: Yeah...

KATHY: Yeah, it's difficult for me to process this. This just isn't who Peregrine is.

SHE'S AN EXCELLENT STUDENT,
AND WAS ALWAYS A RATIONAL CHILD.
SHE MIGHT HAVE REBELLED HERE AND THERE IN THE PAST
BUT NOTHING THIS WILD.

SHE'S THE SISTER, FOR GOD'S SAKE, OF SOMEONE WHO DIED
WHEN HE WENT OUT AND PLAYED IN THOSE WOODS!
I MEAN FRANKLY, FOR ME --
I'M AFRAID OF THOSE WOODS.

SHE KNEW IT WAS WRONG,
HOW UPSET I WOULD BE.
AND THAT'S WHY SHE LIED AND SHE TRIED WHAT SHE COULD
JUST TO KEEP IT FROM ME.

SHE'S BROKEN MY TRUST.
HOW FAR WILL SHE GO?
SHE'S NOT THE GIRL I KNOW...

BRETT NARRATION: If you've been wandering lost, dead reckoning can help reorient you. But if you didn't realize you were lost, if you

thought the whole time you knew where you were headed, then dead reckoning may lead to an unwelcome surprise.

DONALD: *(Replay of opening tape)* I should've known months ago, felt like a damn fool when I got the call...

BRETT NARRATION: Kathy had wanted to be the first to talk to Donald. She hoped that as cousins, as parents, they might together be able to decide how to deal with their kids' reckless behavior. But fate had other plans.

[INTENSE DRUMS BEGIN]

LEXY: *(on the phone)* I know Peregrine didn't mean for anybody to get hurt. But when all she cares about is herself and her "Final" then that's what's gonna happen.

ERIC: *(on the phone)* We didn't know why she wanted to meet for a second session, but she seemed really worked up so we just went.

WOODSLEY: *(on the phone)* She was next-level intense.

PEREGRINE / TEENS:

ONE! FEEL THE ROOTS WHEN YOU
TWO! BURST UP AND
THREE! FEEL THE POWER IN YOUR
FOUR! AND AGAIN!

ERIC: *(on the phone)* That's when she told us that her mom had found out about "The Final"

LEXY: *(on the phone)* And she was super pissed cause her mom said she had to call off The Final and wasn't allowed to go back out into the woods anymore.

WOODSLEY: *(on the phone)* And she was just yelling out instructions, one after the next.

PEREGRINE / TEENS:

DODGE! EVERY ROCK WHEN YOU--
SPRINT! THROUGH THE PAIN
(shouted) Faster JF, come on! Come on!!

WOODSLEY: (on the phone) And John Francis would never back down from a challenge.

LEXY: (on the phone) And she was just pushing him too hard and...

PEREGRINE / TEENS: (as above)
STRIKE! LEFT RIGHT, LEFT RIGHT, AND
DROP!

[CRACK! JOHN FRANCIS GASPS.]

LEXY: (On the phone) You could tell by the sound it was broken bone for sure. But Howl was asleep, and no one knew what to do, so I called 9-1-1. And that's when everything fell apart.

[MUSIC - "DEAD RECKONING"]

ALL:
DEAD RECKONING
DEAD RECKONING
DEAD RECKONING
WHOA, WHOA, WHOA, WHOA!

PEREGRINE:
WHEN IT BREAKS,
YEAH IT BREAKS AT THE CENTER
WHERE YOU WENT AND PUT YOUR FAITH
ALL YOUR FAITH IN THE PEOPLE THAT YOU LOVE

FAKES
TOTAL FAKES WHO CAN NEVER
COMPREHEND THE TOLL IT TAKES
WHEN THEY BREAK
WHEN THEY BREAK YOUR TRUST

KATHY:
WHY DID I TRUST HER
I MUST HAVE KNOWN
WHAT KIND OF MOTHER
WOULD LET HER GO OUT THERE ALONE?

KATHY & PEREGRINE:
WHY DID I TRUST HER
I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN

KATHY:

NO DAUGHTER KNOWS MORE ABOUT LIFE THAN HER MOTHER

PEREGRINE:

NO WONDER, SHE'S JUST LIKE THE OTHERS,

KATHY & PEREGRINE:

SHE CAN'T UNDERSTAND HOW I SUFFER ALONE

ALL:

DEAD RECKONING

DEAD RECKONING

DEAD RECKONING

WHOA, WHOA, WHOA, WHOA!

DONALD (on the phone): Meanwhile they get the x-ray on my son, doctor said his wrist is shattered, gonna take weeks to heal. There goes a track scholarship, there goes doing any damn paperwork at my dealership... See, that's when I started making phone calls, and people started talking...I get a hold of Sheriff Porter. He passes me off to one of his cronies, thought that would stop me-- *pffft*. I found out that back when Jacob went missing, first day of the search, they get a call at the police station. Low, gravelly voice-- asking if there's any reward for finding the missing boy. They tell him no, no reward. He hangs up. Three days later, another call, same low, gravelly voice-- he found Jacob's body...

BRETT NARRATION: As far as Donald saw it, this was all but certain evidence that Jacob Wells was alive longer than the police had thought. That Peter Howland knew it, knew where he was, and didn't do anything about it.

DONALD: Spiteful son of a bitch let him die. Just 'cause we wouldn't pay him off to be a decent citizen. And now he wants to indoctrinate my son? Not gonna happen!

BRETT NARRATION: Between what he had learned from the cops, and what had happened to John Francis, Donald Van Calcar was ready to take action. If Peter Howland had anything to do with the death of Jacob Wells, he wanted the world to know.

He made more calls, and within 24 hours, local news swarmed Howl's cottage. Howl shut himself inside and wouldn't be seen for nearly a month.

And just like that all the work that Peregrine and the others had put into preparing for The Final was undone. Peregrine and John Francis were grounded, the rest of the Survivalists dispersed and leaderless. Everyone left angry and alone.

KATHY: (*Simultaneous*)

WHY DID I TRUST HER?
I MUST HAVE KNOWN
WHAT KIND OF MOTHER
WOULD LET HER GO OUT THERE ALONE?

WHY DID I TRUST HER
I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN
NO DAUGHTER KNOWS MORE ABOUT LIFE THAN HER MOTHER
SHE CAN'T UNDERSTAND HOW I SUFFER ALONE

PEREGRINE: (*Simultaneous*)

PUSH INTO THE FEAR UNTIL IT SHATTERS
BARRIERS BEWARE YOU'RE GONNA SHATTER
THEY WANT ME TO SLIP UP
THEY'RE BUILDING UP EVERY WALL
I AIN'T GONNA GIVE UP
I WON'T LET 'EM SEE ME FALL

MAKE ANOTHER CRACK IT DOESN'T MATTER
NEVER GONNA STOP UNTIL WE SHATTER
MAKE ANOTHER CRACK IT DOESN'T MATTER
NEVER GONNA STOP UNTIL WE SH--
MAKE ANOTHER CRACK IT DOESN'T MATTER
NEVER GONNA STOP UNTIL WE
SHATTER IT ALL

ALL: (*Simultaneous*)

DEAD RECKONING
DEAD RECKONING
DEAD RECKONING
WHOA, WHOA, WHOA, WHOA!

BRETT NARRATION: And amidst the chaos, Howl's philosophy seemed clearer than ever. Most people expect things to work out in their best interest.

BRETT: Do you think Howl knew about Jacob? Do you think he let him die?

PEREGRINE: (*On the phone*) I don't know what to think, honestly.
This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

BRETT NARRATION: But nature doesn't care about your expectations. The only question is, when the worst thing happens, will you be prepared?

BRETT: So does this mean The Final is off for good?

PEREGRINE: Not if it's up to me.

BRETT: Is it up to you?

PEREGRINE: We'll see.

BRETT NARRATION: Next time.

[*UNDERScore*]

LAUREN SHIPPEN: (*reading credits*) In Strange Woods is a production of Atypical Artists. The series was created & written by Jeff Luppino-Esposito, Brett Ryback & Matt Sav. The series was directed by Jeff Luppino-Esposito, music produced by Matt Sav & Evan Cunningham, and sound designed by Brandon Grugle & Stephen Jensen. In Strange Woods is executive produced by Matt Sav, Brett Ryback, Jeff Luppino-Esposito, Lauren Shippen & Briggon Snow. For more information about the cast and crew, please visit instrangewoods.com