

IN STRANGE WOODS

Episode #103 - "Alone"

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with

**Music by
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and

**Lyrics by
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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

[MUSIC - "BALLAD OF THE STRANGE WOODS 1"]

BRETT NARRATION:

THESE TREES WERE PLANTED LONG AGO
WHEN HUMANKIND WAS YOUNG.
AND IN THE INTERVENING YEARS
POETS, SAINTS, AND BALLADEERS
HAVE WRIT OF ALL THE SUNDRY FEARS
THAT LIE WITHIN THE WOODS.
THE STRANGE, STRANGE WOODS.

CHELSEA HAMILTON (TV REPORTER): I'm here at the home of Peter Howland, where just over a year and a half ago, the body of 18-year-old Jacob Wells was discovered on this property. At the time, authorities called it an 'accidental death.' But Jacob's uncle, Donald Van Calcar, has new information that he says should prompt law enforcement to re-open the case.

DONALD: Howland called the sheriff's department...and he asked them if there was a reward for finding my nephew. And when he found out that there wasn't, he waited three days before telling them he found his body *on his property*. Now, you're telling me he didn't know where he was when he called about that reward?

CHELSEA HAMILTON: And you think perhaps Jacob was still alive when Mr. Howland made the call?

DONALD: That's right. That's exactly right. He let him die outta spite for the whole town, is what I think.

CHELSEA HAMILTON: In a related twist to the story, Donald's son, John Francis, was recently injured on Howland's property while

playing with his cousin, Jacob's sister, Peregrine Wells. Along with three other teens, the pair have been training to undertake a survival challenge, allegedly spearheaded by Howland.

BRETT NARRATION:

AND WHEN THE WINTER BRINGS TO BEAR
THAT COLD AND CREEPING NIGHT,
WE HUDDLE 'ROUND THE SOLSTICE FEAST
AWAITING DAYLIGHT FROM THE EAST
TO WARD OFF ANY HOWLING BEAST
THAT WANDERS FROM THE WOODS.
THE STRANGE, STRANGE WOODS.

DONALD: They should be opening an investigation into negligence for my son, and they should be opening a wrongful death investigation for Jacob. We've got a monster right here in Whitetail... threatening the safety of our community. We have to do something about it.

BRETT NARRATION: I'm Brett Ryback and this is "In Strange Woods."
Chapter 3: "Alone."

[IRENE MAKES COOKIES]

IRENE: Right now I'm making the ones -- okay, so these are the ones with the nuts. And then these are the ones, when they're done, I'm gonna make without the nuts. And then I've got the frosted sugar cookies, I got the ginger snaps, the lady fingers, and the peanut butter blossoms.

DECLAN (Off-mic): Oh, and don't forget the lemon squares.

IRENE: No, and I got the lemon squares. But those I just buy at the Pic N' Save. Don't -- don't tell anyone that.

DECLAN: Oh, come on. They already know.

IRENE: (To DECLAN) No, they do -- no they do not!!

DECLAN: They know. C'mon.

IRENE: Declan!

BRETT NARRATION: It's December 27th, and Irene O'Connor is baking treats for her annual New Year's Eve party, only four days away. It's a favorite event in the community, and she's been throwing it for the last thirteen years.

IRENE: 2003. Ever since Shanley was born.

BRETT NARRATION: But this year, Irene has reason to be nervous. Tensions between the Wells family and their cousins the Van Calcars have been high ever since John Francis fractured his wrist.

IRENE: Listen to this. This is the message that I got from Kathy.

[IRENE PLAYS A VOICEMAIL]

KATHY: (Via the voicemail) Hi, Irene, it's Kathy calling. Um, I hope you and Declan and the boys had a good Christmas yesterday. Um, the reason I wanted to call is...

IRENE: Here she goes.

KATHY: I think with everything that's been going on the last couple weeks it might be best if Peregrine and I just don't come to the party this year. We just don't wanna...we don't --

IRENE: Okay, so you heard that. Okay so then today I get this one. Hold on. Here we go.

[IRENE PLAYS ANOTHER VOICEMAIL]

JOHN FRANCIS: Um, Hi, Mrs. O'Connor, this is John Francis, uh, Van Calcar. Um...uh, my dad wanted me to call you to let you know that we're probably not gonna come to your New Year's Eve party on Saturday, and that-

IRENE: Did you hear that?

JOHN FRANCIS: We're really sorry about that--

IRENE: I mean this just really threw me for a doozy here, 'cuz without them there's no turkey drop. I don't know how to --

DECLAN: (*Off-mic*) Oh, Good! Yeah, great! You won't set the damn house on fire!

IRENE: Okay, just...ignore him. He's always hated the turkey drop.

BRETT NARRATION: Okay - a quick history on the Turkey Drop. Irene's sister lives in a town called Escanaba, Michigan. She told Irene about a local tradition there called the Pasty Drop. During the countdown to midnight on New Year's Eve, a crane lowers a giant pastry onto a street festival below - like the ball in Times Square.

IRENE: A pastry is a meat pie. It's kinda like a local delicacy there. And since we do ham for Christmas, I thought, well, I thought why don't we just do a *turkey drop* for New Years? Just tie it up and then you lower it into a deep-fryer and then an hour later everybody's got a late-night snack.

BRETT NARRATION: You heard that right. For the past two years, the O'Connors have lowered a raw turkey into a deep-fryer to ring in the New Year. It quickly became a holiday favorite, and a new Whitetail tradition was born.

IRENE: So, the first year we did it inside over the stove, and --

DECLAN: And she burnt down the house!

IRENE: NO!! I --

DECLAN: Yeah. Yeah.

IRENE: You! Git...go away!

DECLAN: What?

IRENE: I almost burnt it down. You're just so dramatic! What is this? You're showing off. So, then last year --

DECLAN: We had to repaint the walls!

IRENE: Well, we had to anyways. So, anyway, last year we moved it outside, and we bought a fire extinguisher. But *someone* didn't take the turkey out of the fridge in time --

DECLAN: Oh, you're blaming me for that?

IRENE: --so we missed the whole countdown altogether. Yeah!

DECLAN: Yeah.

IRENE: So *this* year the plan is that we just set everything up in advance, and let the turkey just hang above the fryer until we're ready to turn it on and drop 'er in. So, that, I thought...hold on...

BRETT NARRATION: The problem is Kathy Wells owns the bull rope they use for the turkey; a professional-grade rope that won't burn up in the deep fryer. It's a leftover from her ex-husband who ran a tree-trimming business. The other problem is -- the deep-fryer belongs to Donald Van Calcar.

IRENE: And now we got this family feud going on and the turkey drop is hangin' in the balance.

DECLAN: (*Off-mic*) Cancel it!

IRENE: Oh, honest to pete. (*To BRETT*) Just he has always hated the turkey drop. I don't know what it is.

BRETT NARRATION: I went to the Wells' house that afternoon. There was tension in the air.

KATHY: Well, I feel betrayed - I don't know how else to say it. I told her I didn't want her going over there to Howland's place anymore. So she's upset at me, and Donald's upset at me, and Irene is upset at me...and I just, I don't know...

BRETT: What is Donald upset about?

KATHY: Well, he blames me for what happened to John Francis...and he thinks I'm being naive about Jacob. Y'know ever since my divorce he's felt the need to be "Uncle Donald" in charge with the kids...and I appreciate it, I really

do...but, y'know, I think I know how to raise my own kids! (She sighs.) And now he's calling up a lawyer, I guess, and he's wanting to press charges...it's just, it's starting to get real complicated.

[PEREGRINE SHOUTS FROM THE STAIRS]

PEREGRINE: (*Off-mic*) Uncle Donald is calling a lawyer?

KATHY: That's the last I heard.

PEREGRINE: That is so stupid!! Nobody did anything wrong!

KATHY: Well, you don't think it was wrong for you kids to be running around in the woods by yourselves? Your cousin has a compound wrist fracture, that --

[PEREGRINE COMES INTO THE ROOM]

PEREGRINE: It was an accident!! Okay?? Howl wasn't making us do anything, he wasn't even there. It was my fault, okay? It was my fault.

KATHY: Well, why wasn't Mr. Howland there if you were out in the woods by his house?

PEREGRINE: Because I'm trying to learn how to be self-sufficient! So that I don't have to rely on somebody else to take care of me! Because you'll just let me down anyway.

KATHY: Excuse me, but I am looking out for your safety! I don't understand what is so important that you gotta make some plan to put your life at risk.

PEREGRINE: No, you wouldn't understand because you don't even know how to make decisions on your own!

KATHY: I just want to know that I can trust you again, because I don't right now. And it is my job to protect you!

PEREGRINE: If you don't want me training with Howl that's fine. But when I turn 18 in February, I'm going on the Final. And if I have to go by myself, I'll go by myself. But I'm going.

[*PEREGRINE STORMS OFF*]

KATHY: So now you know what it's been like.

BRETT NARRATION: Peregrine tidies the desk in her room. There's dirty clothes strewn on the floor, a stack of incomplete college applications on her dresser. It's been a difficult few weeks.

[*MUSIC FOR "ALONE" BEGINS*]

PEREGRINE:

THE MUD ON THE BOTTOM OF MY BOOTS
THE HOLES IN MY SWEATER
THE KNOTS IN MY HAIR
THERE'S A FEELING THAT ECHOES
WHEN YOU LEAVE THE WOODS
IT FOLLOWS YOU THE WHOLE WAY HOME

THE BLOOD ON THE BOTTOM OF MY LIP
THE SCRAPES ON OUR ELBOWS
THE BRUISES WE SHARE
THERE'S AN EASY SURRENDER
WHEN THEY'RE BY YOUR SIDE
A COMFORT THAT THEY'LL COME TO KNOW
WHAT YOU KNOW, BUT THEY DON'T, NO THEY DON'T...

SO I'LL DO IT
ALONE, ALONE, ALONE
I'LL BE FINE WITHOUT THEM
MMM...

ALONE, ALONE, ALONE
I CAN'T THINK ABOUT THEM
MMM...

JOHN FRANCIS: (*On the phone.*) I haven't seen her since the hospital.

BRETT: She hasn't called or texted?

JOHN FRANCIS: My dad took my phone when he grounded me. And she hasn't called the house, so... I think she's pissed at me for breaking my wrist.

BRETT: How come?

JOHN FRANCIS: 'Cuz then my dad wouldn't be doing all this. We'd be out in the woods, getting ready for the Final...

PEREGRINE:

A ROCK AT THE BOTTOM OF THE LAKE
A WOLF IN A CLEARING
A LEAF IN THE AIR
THERE'S A SILENCE THAT ECHOES
WHEN THEY'RE NOT AROUND
SHATTERING THE HOPE WE'D GROWN
FELT LIKE TRUST, FELT LIKE LOVE, FELT LIKE HOME...

CAN I DO IT
ALONE, ALONE, ALONE
WHY GO ON WITHOUT THEM?
MMM

ALONE, ALONE, ALONE
I STILL THINK ABOUT THEM
MMM

LEXY: (*On the phone*) No...I don't think the Final is gonna happen. If Howl gets arrested...I mean even if he doesn't. Why would he want to go through with it? I get why Peregrine wants to do it, but... I just think she's being really selfish. About all of this.

PEREGRINE:

NO, NO, NO
YOU WANT TO BELIEVE THAT THE FIGHT WILL BE FAIR
THAT SOMEONE WILL COME OR THAT SOMEONE WILL CARE
BUT I STEP IN HIS ROOM AND FIND NOTHING BUT AIR...

THERE'S ONE JOB IN LIFE AND THIS TIME I'M PREPARED
I'M SAVING MYSELF 'CAUSE NO ONE IS THERE
NO ONE IS THERE

SO I'LL DO IT
ALONE, ALONE, ALONE
I'LL BE FINE WITHOUT THEM
MMM

ALONE, ALONE, ALONE
I WON'T THINK ABOUT THEM
MMM

I'LL DO IT ALONE
OOH

BRETT NARRATION: Whitetail is generally uneventful enough that talk of The Final has crept into everyday conversation. And the town is clearly divided on the topic. On one side you've got folks who think the kids are old enough to make their own decisions, on the other side you've got people who believe it's irresponsible to look the other way while teens risk their lives.

I can feel myself standing directly in the middle. I sympathize with Peregrine. She was so close to accomplishing something that she cared a lot about. But I also know how one's judgement can be clouded by emotions, especially when there's trauma involved. And I can only imagine how scary it must be as a parent, to see your kids putting their lives at risk for the sake of, well, anything.

And then there's Howl. Never have I met a man who, the more you learn about him, the less clear he becomes.

DONALD: (*Previous tape*) The stories I could tell you... The stories everybody's got about this guy...

BRETT NARRATION: And Donald's right. Everybody does have stories about him. And the more stories you hear, the less Howl seems like a real person, the more he becomes like a character in a tall tale. A cautionary story that parents tell their kids about an evil winter king who reigns during the cold months, draping the village in early darkness so he can eat little children who misbehave.

I'm only half kidding. Whitetailers have pretty strong opinions about him.

BAIT: Oh, yeah, no, he's crazy!

VICKY: Weirdo.

TACKLE: Completely degranged.

BRETT NARRATION: Here's Donald Van Calcar again.

DONALD: John Francis is 18 and man, I tell ya, when kids turn 18, y'know, they think they can do whatever they want. And legally speaking, sure - maybe they can. So I don't have any legal ways to keep my son from participating, but I can take legal action against Howland and protect my son that way.

BRETT: So is it true you're talking to a lawyer?

DONALD: Yessir. You better believe I am.

BRETT NARRATION: In addition to a negligence charge against Howl for John Francis's broken wrist, Donald wants the sheriff's department to open a wrongful death investigation into his nephew's death. If Howl knew that Jacob was alive and injured somewhere, but didn't say anything, that omission could be criminal.

PORTR: (*On the phone.*) I get where Donald is coming from.

BRETT NARRATION: This is Sheriff Neil Porter. He led the search effort when Jacob Wells went missing. He and Donald have clashed ever since Porter started working in Whitetail.

PORTR: My wife and I have a four-year-old and a six-month-old, so as a parent, I get wanting to lash out against someone who's hurt your family.

BRETT: Then why don't you think a wrongful death investigation should be opened?

PORTR: The coroner's report says Jacob Wells died the night he went missing. The night of the snowstorm. Now, I know some people like to think Howland has superhuman abilities, but how was he supposed to know that Jacob was out there that night in the middle of a snowstorm?

BRETT: But was there a phone call asking about a reward for finding him alive?

PORTER: I can't comment on that sort of thing.

BRETT: Are you saying there *was* a phone call, but you can't comment on it?

PORTER: I have no comment, but if you look at the facts, and the fact that Howland has no history of criminal behavior...everyone just needs to calm down.

BRETT NARRATION: But if you ask some of the locals, Howl does have a history in Whitetail. And not a very good one.

[MUSIC BUILDS UNDER THE FOLLOWING TAPE - "ALWAYS GONNA PAY"]

DONALD: No, he's got a grudge against this town. Had one ever since he got here. Now he's got John Francis pledging allegiance to his nonsense -- puts him in the hospital, gets him riled up for some survival challenge. There's only so much you can take.

THERE'S A COST TO CAUSIN' TROUBLE
CAUSIN' TROUBLE IN THIS TOWN
TRY AND DRAG MY PEOPLE DOWN
WELL, NOT TODAY

THERE'S A COST TO CAUSIN' TROUBLE
CAUSIN' TROUBLE JUST FOR FUN
YOU CAN HIDE, AND YOU CAN RUN
BUT SOMEONE'S ALWAYS
GONNA PAY

DONALD: It's been like this for years; I heard from Vicky, waitress down at the Grey Stone Diner, that she heard straight from...

VICKY: ... I heard from one of our regulars. Says he saw Howland physically removing trail markers from trees. Said they were "too close" to his property. Just hackin' 'em off, like he wants people to get lost. And then when they come knockin' for

help, all he gives 'em is a lecture about how they ought to know better than going out in the woods with no plan.

DONALD: ...it's like he gets a kick outta seeing people suffer. I swear I've told John Francis a million times, we are social creatures. The man who solves other people's issues won't have any of his own.

CAUSE THERE'S A PRIZE FOR PROPER LIVIN'
PROPER LIVIN' EARNS RESPECT
DO YOUR PART AND CASH THE CHECKS
NOW THAT'S THE WAY

THERE'S A PRIZE FOR PROPER LIVIN'
PROPER LIVIN' GOT ME HERE
MAKE A PROBLEM DISAPPEAR
AND SOMEONE'S ALWAYS
GONNA PAY

BAIT: You know why I like Donald Van Calcar? He's a straight talker.

TACKLE: Yeah. He talks your ear straight off.

BAIT: Yeah, that too!

(They both laugh.)

BRETT NARRATION: Bait and Tackle run a small fishing and hunting goods store right where the town meets the Forest. Those aren't their real names, but that's what everyone calls the 64-year-old twin brothers. They've heard their fair share of stories about Howl too.

TACKLE: I told Donald this -- there's the time somebody saw him sleeping inside a gutted moose. Caught him climbing out from under a flap around 5 A.M. like it was nothing.

BAIT: Gives me the heebie-jeebies just thinking about it.

TACKLE: At least it's warmer than sleeping at my mother-in-law's!

BAIT: Yeah, smells better too!
(They laugh, then come down from it)

TACKLE: But the dog...

BAIT: Yeah, the dog's another story.

TACKLE: Yeah, tell him.

BAIT: Okay, so this couple comes into the shop, y'know, they're up from Madison, little weekend trip, and the wife, she's crying and crying, husband doesn't know what to do. See they went out for a hike that morning and--

VICKY: Young couple, I saw 'em that morning, had this big dog. Mastiff. English Mastiff, they said. Real proud.

BAIT: And the two of them are out there probably two miles into the Forest, they just got the dog walking 50 feet in front of them. And suddenly--

TACKLE: Whoosh!

VICKY: An arrow zooms out of nowhere -- *Fwap!* Down goes the Mastiff.

TACKLE: They start screaming, terrified. Where'd that come from? What the hell's going on? Then Howland comes over, compound bow in his hand, he's yelling back at them--

BAIT: "You don't bring a beast like that into the Forest! What do you expect?? It looks like a deer from 80 yards!"

VICKY: Heaven knows why they didn't press charges. Poor kids.

DONALD:

I EARNED MY PLACE, I PAID MY DUES
I WON'T FORGET WHAT I'VE BEEN THROUGH

THE DISRESPECT, THE SHIT YOU GET,
WHEN NO ONE ELSE HERE LOOKS LIKE YOU

THIS MADMAN SPREADS HIS POISON 'ROUND
TRYIN' TO SEE MY WORK UNDONE
(BUT) HE DOES NOT CONTROL THIS TOWN
NOT MY FAM'LY, NOT MY SON!

'CAUSE THERE'S A PATH THAT'S PAVED FOR JUSTICE
PAVED FOR JUSTICE IN THE END
IF YOU FOLLOW IT, MY FRIEND
YOU'LL WIN THE DAY

THERE'S A PATH THAT'S PAVED FOR JUSTICE
PAVED FOR JUSTICE SWIFT AND BLIND
WHEN YOU LEAVE THAT PATH BEHIND
THEN YOU ARE ALWAYS
GONNA PAY

YES, THERE'S A PATH THAT'S PAVED FOR JUSTICE
PAVED FOR JUSTICE SWIFT AND BLIND
WHEN IT'S THREATENED BY HIS KIND
THEN WE MUST ALWAYS
MAKE THEM PAY

[BRETT WALKS UP THE ROAD]

BRETT: Hi there.

REPORTER: You a reporter?

BRETT: What's that?

REPORTER: What station do you work for?

BRETT: No, I'm a writer.

REPORTER: Can you turn that off?

BRETT NARRATION: I went to Howl's property and found a local TV news van parked out front. They were waiting for Howl to emerge, like Bigfoot Fanatics hoping for a money shot. The cameraman said Howl hadn't stepped outside in over 72 hours. "Like he's hibernating," he said.

I felt sorry for Howl, I really did. I understand the town's frustrations. But the stories Whitetailers tell don't exactly line up with the man who opened up to me over a glass of dandelion brandy two-and-a-half weeks ago. Bitter, sure. Maybe even angry. But

principled. And lonely. He has no family, which connects me to him. Or maybe it blinds me, I don't know.

But as far as I can tell, Howl is a folk tale in the truest sense of the phrase. He's a story the town has made up to explain the things they can't understand. His isolation, his odd habits, his otherness.

In some solstice tales, the Winter King must die in order for each new year to begin. Until he does, the days will continue to get shorter and shorter. It's part of the natural cycle. Those stories, it turns out, aren't about fear of the darkness, they're about making way for the light to return.

Stay tuned for more after the break.

[ERIC, WOODSLEY, AND BRETT CRUNCH THROUGH THE SNOW OUT IN THE WOODS.]

WOODSLEY: Again!

ERIC & WOODSLEY:

- 3 Minutes without air.
- 3 Hours without shelter.
- 3 Days without water.
- 3 Weeks without food.
- 3 Months without hope.

WOODSLEY: Again!

ERIC & WOODSLEY:

- 3 Minutes without air...

BRETT NARRATION: I meet up with Eric and Woodsley at the southwest entrance to the Whitetail National Forest. They let me join them as they go on an unofficial training hike, a few days after Christmas.

[BRETT INTERVIEWS THEM IN A CLEARING]

WOODSLEY: After Christmas I was SO BORED, so I called Eric and was like, "My mom's trying to get me to bake cookies, I've GOT to get out of this house."

ERIC: Yeah, and I mean, there's woods everywhere, so...it's not like we have to go to Howl's to keep training.

WOODSLEY: Yeah, we can just go anywhere!

BRETT: Do you guys think the Final is still gonna happen?

ERIC: I mean...I want it to. I don't think that because John Francis broke his wrist we shouldn't keep training.

WOODSLEY: Yeah - he could have broken it pole vaulting, too, you know. They're not just gonna like, shut down the whole athletic program just cuz one kid broke his wrist.

BRETT: Have you guys talked to Peregrine?

ERIC: No.

WOODSLEY: I think she's, like, grounded or something.

BRETT: What do you guys think about people in the town who say that what you're doing is dangerous, or that you're planning to basically march off to your own death?

WOODSLEY: Hmm. I think, like...I don't think we should care about what other people think. 'Cuz, like...well, Howl wouldn't!

ERIC: It's also like...kids are being shot when they go to school, the planet is falling apart...and like --

WOODSLEY: Mm.

ERIC: --nobody's doing anything about it. So, maybe adults are acting like they have our best interest at heart, but...do they really?

[WOODSLEY TEARING OPEN THE WRAPPING PAPER ON A SMALL BOX.]

BRETT NARRATION: Back at the cars, the boys exchange Christmas gifts with each other.

WOODSLEY: (As he tears.) Argghh!

ERIC: It's a lot of tape, sorry.

BRETT NARRATION: Woodsley tears into neatly folded gold wrapping.

WOODSLEY: Oh wow! Uh, what is this?

ERIC: It's a vintage Boy Scout Merit Badge. Pathfinding Merit Badge.

WOODSLEY: Whoa!

ERIC: See, from 1932?

WOODSLEY: Wait, that is so cool!!

ERIC: I got it on E-bay.

WOODSLEY: Wow. Man, this is really awesome. Thanks!

ERIC: Yeah, no problem.

WOODSLEY: Okay, open yours, open yours.

ERIC: Okay, okay.

BRETT NARRATION: Eric rips through the crumpled wrapping job, and his eyes light up.

ERIC: Whooooaaa!!

WOODSLEY: Right?? Isn't that awesome?

ERIC: Wow...!

BRETT NARRATION: It's a Smith & Wesson 7-inch folding knife. Eric weighs it in his hand.

WOODSLEY: Howl always says "The more you know the less you carry," right?

ERIC: Yeah.

WOODSLEY: Well, you got one of these bad boys, you don't need anything else.

BRETT NARRATION: The aluminum handle is a dark purple, which matches Eric's hat and gloves.

ERIC: It's my favorite color.

WOODSLEY: Yeah, I know, I had to look everywhere to find that one.

"SUBTERFUGE"

BRETT NARRATION: On December 29th, Irene O'Connor's party was only two days away, and she still didn't have what she needed for the Turkey Drop.

IRENE: Y'know, I'm just waking up in cold sweats. All I can think about is how can I get my hot little hands on one of those deep-fryers y'know?

BRETT: Why couldn't you just borrow them?

IRENE: No, no, no. I mean..."Oh, hey! Sorry you're having family issues, but can I please borrow your bull rope?" No, that's...that's insensitive, I can't do that.

DECLAN: (*Off mic.*) Yeah, so instead she turns to subterfuge.

[*MUSIC - "IRENE AFTER DENTIST (REPRISE)"*]

IRENE:

WELL, I TELEPHONE KATHY, I'M ASKING HOW IS SHE
THEN MID-CONVERSATION I DROP THE ATTACK.
I CASUALLY MENTION A MESSAGE FROM DONALD:
HE WANTS SOME ADVICE, WOULD I PLEASE CALL HIM BACK.

BRETT: Was that true?

IRENE: No, Brett, course not!
BUT NOW SHE'S INTRIGUED AND SHE'S ASKING "WHAT WAS IT?"
I TELL HER HE TOLD ME HE'S "SORRY."
SHE SAID, "WHY'S HE SORRY?"
I SAID, "'BOUT YOUR FIGHTING."
SHE SAID, "THAT'S EXCITING, CUZ I'M SORRY, TOO!"

SHE'S AS
GRATEFUL AS EVER
AND HANGS UP THE PHONE TO GIVE DONALD A RING.
SHE HAS
NO INDICATION I
ALREADY CALLED HIM AND SAID THE SAME THING!

BRETT: So you were able to get them to talk and work things out. I'm impressed.

IRENE:

IT HONESTLY WASN'T THAT HARD.
I JUST HAD TO PLAY THE RIGHT CARD.
HOW THEY SETTLED AFFAIRS -- WHO KNOWS AND WHO CARES?
'CUZ NOW HERE WE ARE AT THE
PAR-
TY!
All right, well cheers to that!

[THE PARTY NOISE RATCHETS UP AND WE DISCOVER WE MOVE INTO THE PARTY,
HOLIDAY MUSIC PLAYING UNDERNEATH. BRETT INTERVIEWS ATTENDEES]

BRETT: So, I'm just -- I'm going around to people and I'm curious: Have you heard about the kids going out in the woods with Peter Howland --?

PARTY WOMAN: Oh, yeah, yeah. Peregrine Wells.

BRETT: That's right. And what do you think about them doing a survival challenge? Would you let your kids do something like that?

PARTY WOMAN: Oh, no. No way. My kids wouldn't last three seconds without their phones.

BRETT: Could you ever see letting them do something like this, going out in the woods, camping out there --?

PARTY MAN: Sure!

BRETT: Yeah?

PARTY MAN: Oh yeah. Why not? I did worse than that when I was a kid.

BRETT: Oh yeah?

PARTY MAN: Oh, sure. You gotta let kids learn. You gotta let 'em make mistakes.

BRETT: Even, um, dangerous mistakes?

PARTY MAN: Maybe. Sometimes.

PARTY MOM: I wouldn't be so worried about them in the woods...but --

BRETT: You think they could survive in the woods alone?

PARTY MOM: I don't know. But you can't protect them from everything.

PARTY DAD: I'd be more worried about Howland.

PARTY MOM: Yeah.

BRETT: Really?

PARTY DAD: I don't trust him.

PARTY MOM: I would imagine he's pretty upset about all the attention. And I wouldn't be surprised if he tried to get even.

PARTY DAD: That's right.

PARTY MOM: I was actually a little worried about coming here tonight.

BRETT: You think he would do something during the party!?

PARTY MOM: You never know.

PARTY DAD: That's right.

BRETT NARRATION: Whether or not they'd let their own children participate in the final was a matter of debate, but there's one feeling these parents shared...

PARTY MOM: But y'know - they're not our kids!

PARTY MAN: They ain't my kids, so...

PARTY WOMAN: I'm not their mom so I don't have to worry about it! Thankfully!

BRETT NARRATION: Eric and Woodsley gorge themselves on potato chips and pigs-in-a-blanket. They dart back and forth between the upstairs party area and the downstairs rec room.

IRENE: There they are!

KATHY: Hi, hon! Happy New Year!

BRETT NARRATION: About forty minutes in, Peregrine and Kathy arrive, bull rope in hand. Fifteen minutes later, Donald, and his wife Wendy, show up with John Francis awkwardly carrying the deep fryer, his right hand in a neon blue cast. Irene springs into action.

IRENE: (*shouting*) Shannon! Seamus! Upstairs!

DECLAN: C'mon! Let's go boys, get up here!

IRENE: Okay. Go, go outside. go, help your father get the Turkey Drop up. Let's go.

BRETT NARRATION: It's 8pm. Four hours until January 1st. I pull Donald aside and ask him if he's still pushing for charges against Howl.

DONALD: I don't know if we should talk about that here, but the answer is yes. I talked to Sheriff Porter yesterday. Finally.

BRETT: What did he say?

DONALD: He's, ah...considering our options.

[INTERVIEW WITH PORTER ON THE PHONE]

PORTER: (*On the phone.*) There weren't a lot of options.

BRETT NARRATION: This is Sheriff Porter.

PORTER: Negligence is very hard to prove. You'd have to say that Howland's actions, or *inactions*, led directly to John Francis injuring himself. Let alone Jacob Wells's death!

[THE PARTY.]

DONALD: Okay, okay so, okay, they weren't technically on Howland's land when all this stuff happened. But who dragged them out to the forest to begin with? Who made them do those exercises?? Howland!

[PORTER INTERVIEW]

PORTER: Ultimately, Donald is the one responsible for his own son. A case could be made that he should be at fault for negligence. He wasn't too happy when I told him that.

[THE PARTY.]

DONALD: I said he could go [bleep] himself. Put that on your podcast, Brett.

[THROUGH THE NOISE OF THE PARTY]

DECLAN: Hold your horses! I'm gettin' another case of beer. I'll be right back.

BRETT NARRATION: The party is now in full swing. There's about thirty-five adults spread across the main floor of the O'Connor's house, with an additional fifteen kids in the basement below.

The second-story living room opens up onto a deck. From there, porchlight illuminates the O'Connor's backyard below. At the edge of the light is the bizarre configuration of a turkey hanging above an inactive deep fryer, framed by darkness and woods beyond.

10pm. Two hours to go.

[PARTY NOISES]

IRENE: So then I find out from my sister in Michigan that the pasty drop isn't an actual pasty. No, it's not! It's a string of lights in the shape of a pasty!

[A GROUP REACTS]

IRENE: I know! Oh, I know, I couldn't believe it! I think the Turkey Drop is an improvement, if you ask me.

PEREGRINE: Wait! You guys have been training this whole time?

WOODSLEY: Just, like, the last week.

PEREGRINE: Why didn't you tell me?

ERIC: We thought you were grounded.

PEREGRINE: Come over here.

[*PEREGRINE PULLS THEM INTO A CORNER*]

PEREGRINE: Have you talked to John Francis about it?

WOODSLEY: No.

PEREGRINE: He and Lexy aren't talking to me.

ERIC: We haven't heard from either of them.

PEREGRINE: I'm still doing the Final. It's gonna happen.

ERIC: How?

PEREGRINE: I'm turning 18. I'm gonna do it during Mid-Winter Break.

WOODSLEY: That's so awesome!!!

PEREGRINE: Shhh. Are you guys in? I don't wanna have to do it alone.

[*JOHN FRANCIS APPROACHES*]

JOHN FRANCIS: Hey guys.

ERIC & WOODSLEY: Hey! / Hey! Whoa!

JOHN FRANCIS: ...What's up?

WOODSLEY & ERIC: Nothing. / Not much.

JOHN FRANCIS: (To PEREGRINE) Why are you avoiding me?

PEREGRINE: I'm not avoiding you. You haven't texted me once.

[DONALD APPROACHES]

DONALD: What's up, kids.

WOODSLEY & ERIC: Hey / Hi.

DONALD: Peregrine, can I talk to you for a second. Just wanna have a little chat.

PEREGRINE: Uh, sure, okay.

DONALD: Okay? Okay cool.

BRETT NARRATION: Donald walks Peregrine out of the living room, and into one of the vacant bedrooms, just off a hallway. Eric and Woodsley look expectantly at John Francis, who stares at the closed bedroom door.

I find Kathy Wells in the kitchen, grabbing herself another LaCroix. I ask her about what Donald is saying to Peregrine.

KATHY: Oh, I imagine he's telling her that she shouldn't go, that it's for her own safety, that she should trust him, y'know... He's done this before. With Jacob and Peregrine. Tries to be the disciplinarian, I guess, 'cuz he thinks I'm not.

BRETT: Is that something you appreciate or...?

KATHY: I don't know. Bret, you ask me these questions about what do I think about my relationship to my cousin-in-law, and my kids and honestly, Brett, I've never had to think about this stuff. My life has been a series of just gettin' through it,

y'know. And I don't think it's worth much to sit and dwell on stuff because there's nothing you can do about it. But now I'm thinkin', I'm thinkin' about it..."Do I like it?" and -- No! I don't like it. Because....I....when Randy and I divorced I thought, "Y'know, I am not letting anybody else run my life for me anymore." And so when there were tough times, Peregrine and Jacob and me, we'd...we'd figure it out and we'd get through it together! By ourselves! So then when we lost...when Jacob....(She's overwhelmed.) I'm sorry.

BRETT: It's okay.

KATHY: I just...I just sometimes I feel like I've lost faith in my ability to know what to do. Y'know? And it really, it makes me sad. Because I want to trust my kids. 'Cuz I always did. But I also don't wanna see Peregrine gettin' hurt.

BRETT NARRATION: And there's the crux of it. If you try to protect your kids from the harsh realities of the world, how will they be prepared when they're lost in the woods, with no one to find them? On the other hand, is preparing them for the worst an acknowledgement that ultimately we are, all of us, completely on our own?

Before I can say anything to comfort Kathy, Peregrine emerges from the room with Donald. Her eyes are brimming. She catches my glance, wanting to speak, wanting to cry. John Francis sees it, too. Peregrine rushes down the hall to the laundry room and we follow suit.

PEREGRINE: He said Howl is a criminal. And that he let Jacob die. He said it's my fault that John Francis is hurt and that if my mom didn't forbid me from doing the Final then he would.

JOHN FRANCIS: It's not your fault. I wanted to be there. Come here. He's just pissed cuz I can't do track and I can't work at the stupid dealership.

PEREGRINE: I'm not doing this for myself, you know? It's for Jacob. And I don't understand how everyone is just going on with their lives like nothing happened. Because I don't have a brother anymore.

JOHN FRANCIS: I know.

PEREGRINE: And I know it's been like a year and a half, and I'm supposed to just get over it, but I...

JOHN FRANCIS: I know, I know.

PEREGRINE: I can't...I can't!

JOHN FRANCIS: I know. But...what if Howl did know?

PEREGRINE: He didn't.

JOHN FRANCIS: How do you know?

PEREGRINE: I just know! He's not evil. He's just...he's sad. He's sad, and he's alone. And I think everyone he knows has let him down. Including me.

JOHN FRANCIS: You haven't let anybody down. Just weird shit happens, and you sometimes gotta make tough choices.

PEREGRINE: Yeah...

JOHN FRANCIS: Lemme talk to my dad. I think I can get him to back off.

[COMMOTION FROM OUTSIDE.]

PEREGRINE: What is that?

JOHN FRANCIS: I don't know.

[THE COMMOTION GROWS LOUDER, A DOG BARKING]

PARTY WOMAN: (*shouting*) Mackie! Mackie, get back!!

BRETT NARRATION: Peregrine and John Francis head into the living room. I follow. People are gathered outside on the deck, shouting down to the yard below. Some of the younger kids are crying. It seems maybe one of the guests' dog has gotten out...She's shouting for him to get inside...to get away from...

PEREGRINE: Oh my god...it's a bear.

[MUSIC - "I KNOW THIS GIRL"]

[KATHY INTERVIEW - Post Event]

KATHY:

MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS PEREGRINE
TRY TO FIND HER, MAKE SURE SHE'S OKAY.

I SAW DONALD INSIDE ON THE PHONE
AND HE POINTED OUT BACK WHERE THE GUESTS HAD ALL GATHERED,
AND THAT'S WHEN I WENT
AND LOOKED DOWN AT THE BEAR AGAIN.
AND THERE WERE SOME KIDS TRYING TO SCARE IT AWAY.

I COULD RECOGNIZE ERIC AND SHANE
WHO WAS BANGING ON PANS
AND JOHN FRANCIS WAS LOCKED IN THIS DANCE
WITH THE DOG AS IT BARKED AT THE BEAR...
BUT WHO WAS IT THERE
WITH THIS BLANKET MID-AIR?
AND I'M STARIN', AND STARIN' AND...
OH MY GOD IT WAS PEREGRINE!

[ERIC / WOODSLEY / JOHN FRANCIS INTERVIEW -- Post Event]

JOHN FRANCIS: I have no clue where it came from. I just knew that Peregrine ran down the steps and I ran with her.

WOODSLEY: So, Peregrine grabbed my mom's quilt so she would look bigger -- I grabbed the lemon square tins and just went to town on 'em. Bang bang bang!

ERIC: The bear just wanted to get the turkey, obviously, but the dog kept charging at him, and the bear would swat back. It was this...cycle that wasn't just going to end unless we did something.

[FROM A DISTANCE, AMIDST HUB-BUB -- WOODSLEY BANGING ON POTS]

WOODSLEY: (*shouting*) Hey!!!! Heeeyyy!!!

PEREGRINE: (*From a distance*) Eric, grab the other end of the blanket. Spread out slowly!

KATHY:

THE WAY SHE TOOK CHARGE...
LIKE SHE KNEW WHAT TO DO.
IT'S SO STRANGE WHEN YOU WITNESS AN INSTANT
YOUR DAUGHTER BECOMES SOMEONE NEW.
WHO WAS THIS GIRL?
WHO IS THIS GIRL?

PEREGRINE: Grab the dog...

JOHN FRANCIS: I got him, I got him.

PEREGRINE: Okay, move toward the fryer. Slowly. Eyes on the bear.

KATHY:

SHE WAS STANDING HER GROUND.
SHE WAS FEARLESS AND FREE.
AND SHE ALMOST RESEMBLED A KIND OF A WOMAN
THAT I'VE TRIED TO BE.
I KNEW THIS GIRL.
I KNOW THIS GIRL.

PEREGRINE: Follow my lead - We got this, we got this.

KATHY:

SHE'S THE BABY I CLUNG TO
MANY NIGHTS SPENT CONFUSED AND AFRAID.
SHE'S THE CHILD WHOSE EYES GAVE ME STRENGTH
TO MAKE CHOICES I KNEW MUST BE MADE.

SHE'S THE GIRL FOR WHOM I TRIED TO LIVE
LIKE A WOMAN THAT SHE COULD ASPIRE TO BE.
AND LOOK AT HER NOW...
SHE'S INSPIRING ME.

[A SUDDEN RISE FROM THE CROWD. "Oh god!" "Look out!"]

THE BEAR SHARPLY VEERED FOR THEM.
AND I SUDDENLY FELT MY HEART FREEZE.

THEY WERE MAYBE TEN FEET FROM THE BEAST

AND I SHOUTED TO DONALD, "YOU HAVE TO GO HELP THEM!"
BUT NONE OF US COULD SO WE STOOD THERE
AND FEARED FOR THEM.
AS THEY SIDESTEPPED THEIR WAY TOWARD THE TREES.

I SAW PEREGRINE GESTURE TO ERIC AND
TELL HIM TO BRING HER SOMETHING WITH THE FRYER, I THINK?
WITH ALL OF THE NOISE IT WAS HARD TO DISTINGUISH
THE THING WHICH HER FINGER WAS POINTING AT...
'TIL ERIC EMERGED WITH THE FIRE EXTINGUISHER!

[FROM A DISTANCE, THE FIRE EXTINGUISHER SPRAYS. THE CROWD REACTS.]

HE SPRAYED AT THE BEAR
WHO ROARED AND THEN REARED,
AND THEN WHEN THE AIR CLEARED
THE BEAR DISAPPEARED...
AND WE THREW UP OUR HANDS AND WE CHEERED FOR THEM!

[THE CROWD CHEERS AND CELEBRATES. MUSIC SWELLS]

THIS IS THE KID THAT I PRAYED EACH NIGHT
WOULD GROW UP COURAGEOUS AND SMART,
KNOWING WHEN SHE SHOULD FOLLOW THE RULES
AND WHEN SHE SHOULD FOLLOW HER HEART.

THE GIRL THAT SHE IS IS THE PERSON
I ALWAYS EXPECTED MY DAUGHTER TO BE.
I GUESS I FORGOT
THAT'S WHAT I TAUGHT HER TO BE.

[KATHY EMBRACES PEREGRINE]

KATHY: Oh my god, oh!! I can't believe you did that!

PEREGRINE: I know..

KATHY: Are you okay?

PEREGRINE: Yeah...

KATHY: I was so scared!

PEREGRINE: I'm okay, mom. I'm okay.

KATHY:

SHE KNOWS RIGHT FROM WRONG
SHE'S AWARE OF THE RULES.
BUT NOW I CAN SEE THAT WE'RE BUILT DIFFERENTLY...
STILL...I GAVE HER THE TOOLS.

AND LOOK WHO SHE IS,
HOW FAR SHE CAN GO.
SHE'S A GIRL
I'M SO LUCKY TO KNOW.

[LOCAL TV NEWS MUSIC INTRO]

DEREK RODRIGUEZ: Good Evening, I'm Derek Rodriguez. Our first story tonight, an attack by a black bear at a New Year's Eve party turns local teens into heroes. Chelsea Hamilton has the story.

CHELSEA HAMILTON: Whitetail Resident Irene O'Connor's annual New Year's Eve party received a visit by an uninvited guest. About an hour before the clock struck midnight, a black bear wandered onto her property, attacking and injuring a neighbor's dog. Thanks to the swift action of four teenagers, the bear was frightened away and no further injury occurred. Authorities say the bear was drawn by a raw turkey hanging from a tree in the O'Connor's backyard -- part of an annual "Turkey Dropping" tradition in the O'Connor family.

IRENE: I'm still in shock. I mean...you just, you can't...you can't prepare for this kinda thing!

DEREK RODRIGUEZ: As of this evening, the bear is still being tracked down by the Sheriff's department.

PORTR: (*On the phone*) We found it, we shot it.

BRETT: Oh really?

PORTR: Yep. Not something you see everyday.

BRETT: Yeah, I would have thought bears would be hibernating.

PORTER: Well, bears don't actually hibernate, but the unusual thing was that this bear had what looked like, uh...whatchamacallit...uh, collar marks. On his neck. And his back claws were...well, they were either scraped down or clipped.

BRETT: Oh wow.

PORTER: Yeah, when we tracked him down, he just laid there. Didn't try to run away or attack. Very unusual for a wild black bear.

BRETT: You think it was, like, a pet??

PORTER: Unclear. But it's pretty certain it had human contact in the past. People do stupid things, try to domesticate wild animals. That's never gonna work out. If it's a wild beast, he's gonna do wild things. So it's good we got to him before he caused more damage.

PEREGRINE: (*On the phone.*) Well, John Francis told his dad that he's not doing the Final. That's how he got him to drop the charges.

BRETT: Yeah, I was surprised to hear the charges had been dropped.

PEREGRINE: Yeah, I guess he didn't care what I did, he just didn't want John Francis doing it, too. But my mom is finally on board. Thank god. So, it's just going to be me, Eric, and Woodsley.

BRETT: What about Lexy?

PEREGRINE: She still says it's a bad idea. And that she won't go if John Francis isn't going. Which is (*she laughs*) interesting.

BRETT: She likes him.

PEREGRINE: Yeah. I guess she does. I never really thought about that.

BRETT: And what about Howl?

PEREGRINE: He'll be there.

BRETT: How do you know?

PEREGRINE: He always expects that other people will let you down. He's not going to be the one to let us down. We're family. The only family he has.

[MUSIC - "BALLAD OF THE STRANGE WOODS 2"]

BRETT NARRATION: Peregrine was right. The media circus around Howl would dissipate in the early days of the New Year. And after nearly four weeks of being shut inside, Howl was in need of food. He emerged and walked his wagon to the Pic N' Save to gather more of his winter sustenance.

Peregrine's bravery against the bear attack made her a celebrity at school. And pretty soon the story joined the repertoire of local lore at Bait and Tackle's shop.

BAIT: She's got nerves of steel, I tell ya what.

TACKLE: If I came face to face like that, I'd be the one running!

BAIT: And he's talking about the girl, not the bear, y'know!

TACKLE: That's right!

BRETT NARRATION: Now with the community behind her, and with Kathy's blessing, Peregrine and the two boys would resume their training in advance of a February 13th Final. All of Whitetail would be watching the event. Standing by as three of their young would be led deep into the woods by an outsider, placing silent bets on whether or not they would be able to survive.

PORTER: Honestly, now that that bear is dead, I think the real danger is gone.

BRETT NARRATION:

BY NOW YOU'VE LIKELY RECOGNIZED

THE REASON IN THIS RHYME.
IT ISN'T RIVERS, ROCKS, OR TREES
THAT MAKE THE WOODS AS STRANGE AS THESE.
IT'S LIFE'S UNWELCOME GUARANTEES
THAT CONSTITUTE THESE WOODS.

THE THINGS THAT MAKE US HURT AND GROW --
SUDDEN GRIEF, INCESSANT WOE --
THEY COME TO ALL, AND ALL WILL KNOW
THE DARKNESS OF THOSE WOODS.
THE STRANGE, STRANGE WOODS.

PORTER: The thing about Van Calcar's suit against Peter Howland...It's nearly impossible to prove intentionality in a wrongful death case. How you gonna show that somebody was motivated to not do something, at the detriment of others? Only a...a *history* of that sort of malice is gonna be convincing to a judge and jury.

BRETT NARRATION: And according to Sheriff Porter, Howl just didn't have that kind of history.

[BEEP!]

SANDRA: (*On the phone.*) Hi, yes...I'm calling for Brett Ryback?

BRETT NARRATION: At least as far as any of us knew.

SANDRA: My name is Sandra Pierce. I'm Peter Howland's cousin.

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