

IN STRANGE WOODS

Episode #104 - "The Man I Remember"

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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

**BRETT NARRATION:** The traumas that happen to you when you're young stay with you, and shape who you become. The loss of a sibling, of a parent. Only our families know the person we were before, the person we might have been. So I was very interested when I received a call from Sandra Howland-Pierce."

**SANDRA:** (*On the phone.*) Hello?

**BRETT:** Hi, is this Sandra?

**SANDRA:** This must be Brett.

**BRETT:** Yes, hi. How are you doing today?

**SANDRA:** I'm so fine, thank you so much.

**BRETT NARRATION:** My relationship to Howl, to Peregrine, and The Final had become entirely clouded. I wanted clarity, perspective. At least that's what I told myself.

**SANDRA:** Yes, PJ is my cousin. Peter James. We're first cousins. His only cousin, as a matter of fact. We're practically siblings.

**BRETT:** Uh-huh.

**SANDRA:** It's hard to imagine it now. I haven't spoken to Peter James in...oh dear. Fifty years?

**BRETT:** Oh wow.

**SANDRA:** I thought he was dead. I mean, for many years now I thought he had died.

**BRETT NARRATION:** Sandra found out that Howl was very much alive through a Google alert her granddaughter set up so Sandra could track the family name. The recent news about Whitetail had put Howl back on the grid. Sandra reached out from her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to somebody who was quoted in a newspaper article.

**SANDRA:** Uh, Irene O'Connell? No -- O'Connor? She told me I should talk to you; that you were writing a story about PJ...

**BRETT:** Well, a podcast.

**SANDRA:** I'm sorry?

**BRETT:** I'm doing a podcast.

**SANDRA:** I don't know what that is.

**BRETT:** That doesn't matter --

**BRETT NARRATION:** She said she was concerned about Howl. The article made it seem like he was in legal trouble, and might be in financial straits. She seemed worried about how this story might affect her family's legacy.

[OPENING UNDERSCORE BEGINS UNDER THE FOLLOWING.]

**SANDRA:** What exactly has PJ told you about us? About his family?

**BRETT:** To be honest -- nothing.

**SANDRA:** Nothing?

**BRETT:** No.

**SANDRA:** Well, that surprises me.

**BRETT:** How come?

**SANDRA:** How come...Have you ever seen Boston in the Winter? You may want to consider a little trip...

**BRETT NARRATION:** I'm Brett Ryback and this is In Strange Woods.

Chapter 4: "The Man I Remember."

I've spent the last twenty years of my life trying to piece together my own family history. Ever since I was thirteen, when my parents died in a car accident in my hometown, just outside of Chicago.

My younger sister and I were cared for by my grandmother, who did a pretty good job given the circumstances. She used to tell me stories about our family. A way to keep them all alive.

The whole becoming an orphan thing doesn't exactly bring the sort of attention a closeted gay teen wants in a Midwest high school. So I pushed myself to move on quickly, stealing tears in the bathroom and feeling plenty of shame about it.

I spent many years foraging through my past for any shred of meaning or identity. Even now I can't help but wonder what my parents would think of me -- their gay, married son, who grew up to be a writer and a storyteller.

It was that searching that brought me back to Whitetail after so many years; the happy memories of family fishing trips, 4th of July

fireworks, cross-country skiing. I came for my history, and in the process I met Peregrine and Howl.

[*UNDERSCORE - "WHAT THEY DIDN'T KNOW"*]

**BRETT NARRATION:** Maybe that's why I was so primed to believe that they were like me -- outsiders, still dealing with the tragedy in their pasts.

**PEREGRINE:** Bring gear. That was the compromise. You know, she said The Final was about overcoming being lost, not about putting ourselves in mortal danger for no reason.

**BRETT NARRATION:** I met up with Peregrine one more time before heading to Massachusetts. She and her mother had agreed on terms for The Final, which was five days away at this point.

**PEREGRINE:** So we could still do it, but we have to bring enough gear to keep us safe and warm outside in the winter.

**BRETT NARRATION:** My plan was to fly to Boston, interview Sandra, and then fly back in time to see the teens off on Friday morning.

After the incident with the bear, Howl finally reached out to Peregrine again at the Pic N' Save.

**PEREGRINE:** He's not angry about what happened. We had a good talk, actually. He said it was a good reminder. To reconnect with what's important.

[*MUSIC - "STAY CLEAR"*]

**BRETT NARRATION:** I asked Howl to sit for another interview. I wanted to know what went through his mind those weeks shut up in his cabin. He wasn't rude about it, but he declined. "I don't like things getting so complicated," he told me. "Time to simplify."

**PEREGRINE:** He said...

IF YOU FEEL YOU'VE LOST YOUR STRIDE  
PRINCIPLES CAN BE YOUR GUIDE.  
CONCENTRATE ON WHAT'S INSIDE.  
STAY CLEAR.  
STAY CLEAR.

**BRETT NARRATION:** I wanted to believe that the Final was a good idea. That these kids were creating a rite of passage for themselves -- one that our society neglected to give them. I wanted to believe that

this was normal. Necessary even. But deep down I kept asking myself: why? Why were Peregrine, the teens, and I so willing to trust Peter Howland when so many others didn't?

I told myself I had a responsibility to learn everything I could about his past. That that would be my contribution to these kids. I didn't want to feel like I was sitting back and watching them risk their lives without having all the facts.

**PEREGRINE:**

PEOPLE MAY NOT UNDERSTAND

WHY YOU'VE PLANNED THE THINGS YOU'VE PLANNED.

DO NOT LET THEM TURN YOUR HAND.

STAY CLEAR.

STAY CLEAR.

**BRETT NARRATION:** But looking at it now -- now that everything is said and done -- I can't help but wonder if the pieces weren't already there in front of me. If I already knew what I needed to know to prevent the pain, and suffering, and resulting death that was to come.

[THE SOUND OF BRETT WALKING UP THE DRIVEWAY TO THE DOOR.]

**BRETT:** Hi!

**SANDRA:** Hello!

**BRETT:** Hey there --

**SANDRA:** You made it!

**BRETT:** I did! I did, thank you.

**SANDRA:** Welcome. Jeffrey can take your things.

[TALKING CONTINUES AS BRETT NARRATES]

**BRETT NARRATION:** Sandra Howland-Pierce lives in a stately yellow mansion that faces away from Brattle Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her driveway winds along the side of the house before opening up to a cozy courtyard, with snow-covered stone flower beds and an empty fountain. It's a far cry from Howl's cabin in the woods of Whitetail.

Sandra invites me into the back entrance wrapped in a suede and cashmere shawl alongside Jeffrey, her domestic.

**SANDRA:** Feel free to take those boots off. I had some slippers delivered for you.

**BRETT:** Oh wow!

**BRETT NARRATION:** Her bright white hair is cut short and choppy, giving her a chic look befitting her position as a philanthropic art collector.

**BRETT:** I'm just gonna clip this mic here...

**SANDRA:** Ooh, fun!

**BRETT:** Okay, if you want to tell me what you had for breakfast, I can get a level...

**SANDRA:** For breakfast? I had...what did I have?

**BRETT NARRATION:** Sandra seems both nervous and excited to be hosting me. It's a quarter past noon, but before she begins a tour of the house...

**SANDRA:** What are we drinking??

**BRETT:** Oh! Um, I'm fine right now.

**SANDRA:** Nonsense. No, no, no. I just had Jeffrey open a fabulous bottle of the FMC Chenin Blanc. Excellent vintage from South Africa. 2012.

**BRETT:** Okay, sure!

**SANDRA:** Yes, yes! Lovely, lovely, lovely!

**BRETT NARRATION:** She sips freely as she whisks me through a potpourri of architectural styles, pausing in each room to point out some detail of the framing or a painting on the wall.

**SANDRA:** Yeah, I have always been a collector. Everything. Recipes, art, wine, chandeliers, records! -- ooh "Happy Times!" I love this one. See, I just want to hold everything as close as I can and squeeze it. Because what I really collect is emotions, memories - happy times! All right, just listen. Why does this thing never work for me the first time... Here we go. Happy Times!

[SANDRA PUTS ON A RECORD, AN OLD STANDARD FROM THE 40s.]

[MUSIC - "HAPPY TIMES!"]

**RECORD:**

HOLD ON TO HAPPY TIMES!  
THOSE SAPPY, HAPPY TIMES!

LAUGHTER, SUNSHINE,  
SILLY NURSERY RHYMES.  
HOLD ON TO HAPPY, HAPPY TIMES!

**BRETT NARRATION:** In a Scandinavian Design-influenced library she shows me her degrees from Williams College, Boston University and Harvard - each in some aspect of Design Theory or Art History.

**RECORD:**

HOLD ON TO HAPPY TIMES!  
THOSE SNAPPY, HAPPY TIMES!  
CHAMPAGNE, FLOWERS  
SILVER WINDOW CHIMES.  
HOLD ON TO HAPPY, HAPPY TIMES!

**SANDRA:** Now, the living room is Queen Anne. And here you see some of our awards from over the years. Philanthropy has always been so important to Elroy and me. Yes, that's a real Picasso by the way.

**RECORD:**

WHEN YOU'RE FEELIN' BLUE, WHAT TO DO?  
FIND A FOND REMINDER OF THE GOOD TIMES THAT YOU KNEW...

AND HOLD ON TO HAPPY TIMES!  
THOSE SCRAPPY, HAPPY TIMES!  
MUSIC, DANCING,  
SHINY ROOSEVELT DIMES.  
HOLD ON TO HAPPY, HAPPY TIMES!

**BRETT NARRATION:** We finally arrive at the home's gem - a carved teak salon designed by Lockwood de Forest.

**SANDRA:** Well, now most of de Forest's work no longer exists outside of museums. He was a leader in the American Aesthetic Movement, which I -

**BRETT NARRATION:** A framed photograph catches my eye. Tucked between a biography of I.M Pei and a book authored by Sandra herself, I instantly recognize a stout young man wearing a pair of black, wire-framed glasses.

**BRETT:** Is this Peter?

**SANDRA:** I'm sorry?

**BRETT:** This is Peter in this picture.

**SANDRA:** Oh, I forgot I had this out.

**BRETT NARRATION:** He's maybe nineteen or twenty years old, holding one end of a large ribbon being cut by two gentleman in the middle. They all wear dark suits, smiling big for the camera.

**BRETT:** Who are these other men?

**SANDRA:** That's my Uncle Degory -- that's PJ's Father -- and Grandpa Benjamin in the middle. And that handsome man was my father.

**BRETT:** What are they celebrating?

**SANDRA:** Oh, uh, this was the opening of a new branch of the company. I hadn't realized I kept this. All of them dead now.

**BRETT:** Except Peter.

**SANDRA:** Yes, yes, of course. Except Peter. All except him... Now, which room was your absolute favorite??

**RECORD:**

CAKES WITH ZESTED LIMES  
HOLD ON TO HAPPY, HAPPY  
THOSE SAPPY, SCRAPPY, SNAPPY  
HOLD ON TO HAPPY --

[THE RECORD SKIPS]

**RECORD:**

HOLD ON TO HAPPY --  
HOLD ON TO HAPPY --

[SANDRA STOPS THE RECORD]

**SANDRA:** Some things keep better than others I suppose.

**BRETT NARRATION:** We sit in the salon next to a picturesque fire. We're surrounded by boxes that Sandra had Jeffery bring up from the basement. He refreshes our wine as Sandra pages through an album of laminated documents.

**SANDRA:** Ever since my husband passed six years ago, I have been fascinated by tracing my family tree. And I've collected all

this...this stuff over the years -- birth certificates, deeds, college essays.

**BRETT NARRATION:** The sheer amount of preserved memories gives an almost royal veneer to the Howland line. If the truth about Howl was anywhere, it was surely somewhere within these boxes.

**SANDRA:** --because - we are an *old* family...here it is!

**BRETT:** (Reading) Document of Certification from...oh wow!

**SANDRA:** Yes, that is right.

**BRETT:** The Mayflower Society.

**SANDRA:** I am a direct descendant of John Howland, passenger on the Mayflower.

**BRETT:** That's incredible.

**SANDRA:** Yes, if you're doing a story about the Howland family, well this! This is the story right here! We are foundational to this country. The Howlands have been here from the beginning!

Aha, look --

**BRETT NARRATION:** I think of reminding her about the people who were here before the Mayflower, but decide against it.

**SANDRA:** He fell off the boat!

**BRETT:** What?

**SANDRA:** He fell off the Mayflower! Yes he did! Right into the Atlantic Ocean - and they had to throw in a rope and drag him out. He could've died! He could've died and then none of this would be here.

**BRETT:** The whole Howland line.

**SANDRA:** That's right. And when you really think about that -- the Roosevelts were cousins, the Bush's. Nixon and Ford, although from a separate branch.

**BRETT:** Good thing they got him back on board.

**SANDRA:** Yes, it really is... to lose even just my branch would have been a grave tragedy for this country.

**BRETT:** In what way.

**SANDRA:** Because of Helion.

**BRETT NARRATION:** Helion. The largest weapons manufacturing company in the United States of America.

**SANDRA:** In 1922 my Grandpa Benjamin founded Helion with Vannevar Pierce -- my husband's grandfather (in case you wondered how we were set up!)

**BRETT NARRATION:** I knew about Helion from researching Sandra before I arrived, but I still find it difficult to wrap my head around the implications. Peter Howland is an heir to a company that Time Magazine called the "engine of the US military industrial complex." Presumably making him an inheritor of an unfathomable fortune.

**SANDRA:** It is our legacy!

**BRETT NARRATION:** Backwoods-living, no car-owning, outhouse-using Peter Howland. Wealthy beyond imagining thanks to decades of government contracts to make the most sophisticated and deadly weapons known to humankind.

**BRETT:** You have to understand -- this is so strange. The Peter Howland that I know...he's off the grid, he doesn't --

**SANDRA:** Wait, wait I'm sorry -- what does that mean "off the grid?"

**BRETT:** He lives in the woods. Doesn't have electricity, doesn't use running water, hunts for food.

**SANDRA:** Oh my.

**BRETT:** Yeah, so to think that...I mean, does he know that he has all of this?

**SANDRA:** Has all of what?

**BRETT:** This inheritance. I assume that he's entitled to -- well, I guess I should ask: is Peter an inheritor of this estate?

**SANDRA:** Well, now that is a complicated question.

**BRETT:** How so?

**SANDRA:** I...PJ was -- sorry, sorry Peter James! I keep calling him PJ, that was his family nickname. He hated being called that. They didn't get along, Peter James and his father.

**BRETT:** Oh.

**SANDRA:** How well do you know Peter James?

**BRETT:** I thought I knew him better than some people, but this is...confusing me.

**SANDRA:** What is "this?"

[MUSIC - "THE MAN I REMEMBER"]

**BRETT:** In my head...I guess this is maybe foolish of me, but I thought of Peter as...an underdog. Not somebody who grew up...well-off.

**SANDRA:** An underdog.

**BRETT:** It's just so different from where he is now...and I guess I'm wondering why.

**SANDRA:** Well, he always was a different child. That was what my father would say.

**BRETT:** How so?

**SANDRA:**

THE MAN I REMEMBER WAS CAREFUL AND COY.  
EASY TO MISS HIM, DRESSED IN BROWN CORDUROY.  
BUT THE MAN I REMEMBER WAS ONLY A BOY...

THE MAN I REMEMBER WAS STUBBORN AND BOLD.  
COULDN'T BE COUNSELED, AND WOULD NOT BE CONTROLLED.  
BUT THE MAN I REMEMBER WAS NINETEEN YEARS OLD...  
ALL THOSE YEARS; UNHAPPY YEARS.

IT'S SILLY TO SAY, WHEN I THINK OF IT NOW,  
THE REASON I WANTED YOU HERE.  
I FELT THAT I NEEDED TO WARN YOU SOMEHOW...

**BRETT:** Warn me?

**SANDRA:**

BUT I'M WRONG. SURELY I'M WRONG.

**BRETT:** When was the last time you and Peter James spoke?

**SANDRA:** In person, it was...it was before he left for the war. For Vietnam. He enlisted in the Marines, it was very sudden.

**BRETT:** You mean he was drafted.

**SANDRA:** No, he enlisted

**BRETT:** Are you sure?

**SANDRA:** Am I sure?? Darling, I'll never forget it as long as I live.

**BRETT:** Why is that?

**SANDRA:**

THE MAN I REMEMBER HAD TRUTHS TO OBEY.  
AND WHEN THEY WERE BROKEN, OH THE HELL WE WOULD PAY.  
BUT IS HE STILL THE MAN I REMEMBER TODAY?

(Quickly.) Sorry, I'm sorry - I just...I'm very warm just now. I'm going to ask Jeffrey to, uh -- would you like some more wine?

**BRETT:** No, no thank you --

**SANDRA:** Sorry, sorry...

**BRETT NARRATION:** The way I understood the story -- the way Howl had told me -- it sounded as though he was drafted into the Marines in 1967. Not that he enlisted.

**HOWL: (Previous tape)** I was a kid when I was sent to Vietnam. Found out the truth about the world then; nobody seemed to think that was inappropriate.

**BRETT NARRATION:** I can't fully explain why this distinction bothered me. I guess I assumed Howl's bitterness for war was the result of his having been forced into it. Why would he choose to go?

**BRETT:** It's my understanding that Peter, Peter James wasn't a...um, that he *struggled* with the idea of war. Is that how you remember him?

**SANDRA:** Well, he and my Uncle Degory were very different types of people...personalities. So yes, they had their...*disagreements* about the business, and the way it was run.

**BRETT:** Because the business was weapons manufacturing.

**SANDRA:** I think it upset Peter James that his father profited off war. That we all did. Him included. Which is silly, of course. He thought his father valued money over people. Which wasn't true.

**BRETT NARRATION:** After Howl left the Marines he went to Pakistan and worked as a laborer in the Middle East and Africa. Eventually he met Gerda in Egypt, and together they traveled the world.

I ask Sandra if she recognizes the name Gerda Pulnik.

**SANDRA:** Gerda. Hmm. Was she --??

**BRETT:** She was a photographer for print media abroad in the '70s and '80s. She and your cousin were very close.

**SANDRA:** Well, he only wrote me once from his time abroad, so I never really knew what he was up to or whom he was close

with...-- but what I really wanted to share with you and your, your readers...or is it listeners, what have you...where are they?

[THE SOUND OF RUFFLING THROUGH BOXES]

**SANDRA:** Aha! Portraitures. Will you look at these.

**BRETT:** Oh how beautiful!

**BRETT NARRATION:** I'm frustrated that whenever I try to turn the conversation to Howl, Sandra blushes and changes topic. I had thought she brought me here to learn the truth about Peter Howland's history. But Sandra seems more concerned that I know the rich, complicated mythology of her family legacy. Had I misunderstood her invitation?

**SANDRA:** Oh, yes, a Howland has fought in every American war since the Revolution!

**BRETT NARRATION:** Yet, the more she divulges -- and the more she drinks -- tiny little cracks begin to form in her story. I begin to sense that something about Howl is hiding among their happy times, something that might reveal whether Peregrine and I were right to trust him; and it feels like Sandra, in her way, wants me to find it.

That's after the break.

Another glass of wine later, and much to my relief, Sandra has arrived at more recent history: her and Howl's childhood. A period that saw the Howland family rise to great prominence and wealth, while privately a growing conflict threatened to blow the family apart.

[MUSIC - "THERE'S NOTHING LIKE A WAR"]

**SANDRA:** When Uncle Degory came back from World War II, he took the reins at Helion and turned the company from science to weapons. From making radar to making bombs. And come the '60s we were in business! Big time!

THE COLD WAR'S GETTING HOTTER  
EUROPE'S STILL A MESS.  
DADDY'S MAKING MISSILES  
AND ME - I GET A BRAND NEW DRESS!

FORTUNES START TO ROCKET.  
WATCH THEM AS THEY SOAR.

**VOCALS:**

(BANG! KABOOM!)

**SANDRA:**

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE A WAR.

**BRETT NARRATION:** In the 1960s America began outsourcing the Cold War, sending bombs to the Middle East, parts of Africa, Central and South America -- all in an effort to stop the spread of Communism. Meanwhile in the States, the cash kept flowing in.

**SANDRA:**

OUR HOMES KEEP GETTING BIGGER  
WITH EV'RY CONTRACT SIGNED.  
CHRISTMAS AT THE WHITEHOUSE  
WITH DOLLS AND TOYS OF EV'RY KIND.  
UNCLE SAM WANTS WEAPONS,  
WE KEEP MAKING MORE.

**VOCALS:**

(BANG! KABOOM!)

**SANDRA:**

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE A WAR.

**BRETT NARRATION:** Those war-torn countries would be the same ones Howl would later travel to with Gerda. I picture him time and again encountering weapons bearing his family crest. Try as he might to escape his family's legacy, Helion would follow him the world over. That is -- until he made it to Whitetail.

**BRETT:** Did Peter ever work for the company?

**SANDRA:** He did.

**BRETT:** In what capacity?

**SANDRA:** Well, it was actually Peter James who suggested the company should expand into chemicals. Yes, that photo you saw - the ribbon cutting. It was his idea that they should make rocket fuel.

**BRETT:** For...spaceships? For NASA?

**SANDRA:** Yes, well, that's what Peter James thought. But you see the profit was in weapons. That is what Helion was known for.

PETER JAMES WANTS SCIENCE  
TO BE OUR BOTTOM LINE.  
NO MORE MAKING MISSILES  
BUT FUEL FOR ROCKETS - THAT WAS FINE.  
HIS FATHER WOULDN'T LISTEN  
THAT'S WHAT GOT HIM SORE...  
Have you ever seen him angry?

**BRETT:** Angry how?

**SANDRA:**

BANG! KABOOM!  
THE FIGHTS THEY HAD  
FLASH! KABLAM  
IT'S GETTING BAD.  
PETER JAMES  
IS REALLY MAD...

BUT OUR HOMES KEEP GETTING BIGGER  
AND THERE'S DRESSES, SHOES, AND JEWELRY,  
AND PARTIES WITH THE GOVERNOR  
AND DADDY'S NEW MERCEDES...

**BRETT:** Are you talking about specific instances of...of outbursts, or --

**SANDRA:** He learned it from his father. I'm not excusing anything, but Uncle Degory was a very punitive man. And when you didn't follow his principles, he would react.

**BRETT:** Punitively.

**SANDRA:**

WHEN IT COMES TO FAM'LY  
SETTLING A SCORE  
THERE'S NOTHING LIKE A WAR.

**BRETT NARRATION:** Two and a half hours into my conversation with Sandra, and suddenly a new picture is emerging. Peter Howland may have been born into a world of wealth, but not a world of love. Fate handed me my hardship, but Peter Howland's trauma came from within

his own family. And the lasting results of that trauma would soon become very clear.

**BRETT:** What was your relationship with your Uncle Degory like?

**SANDRA:** Oh, well, he was like a second father to me. Especially after my father died.

**BRETT:** How old were you?

**SANDRA:** Thirteen.

**BRETT:** Wow. Me, too.

**SANDRA:** Really?

**BRETT:** Yeah. Both my parents.

**SANDRA:** So much pain. Like tiny little cracks. You don't notice them at first, but slowly they eat away. At a family. At a life. You probably don't know this, but my Aunt and Uncle actually had two girls before Peter James.

**BRETT:** Oh.

**SANDRA:** Yes. Charity and Mercy Howland. Peter James's sisters. They died as children. It was very tragic -- a boating accident on the Cape. Six years old.

**BRETT:** Oh my god.

**SANDRA:** My Aunt Bitsy was pregnant with Peter James at the time, and then three months later he was born. You can imagine. All I remember of my Aunt was that she cried. And she drank.

**BRETT:** Hmm.

**BRETT NARRATION:** At this, Sandra waved her hand in the air, shooing away memories. Holding on to happy times.

[MUSIC shifts to "THE MAN I REMEMBER"]

**SANDRA:** Well, then when I was born there was a new little girl in the family, and so everyone adored me, especially my uncle.

**BRETT:** Did that ever make Peter jealous?

**SANDRA:** Perhaps. Perhaps it did. But that's the way Uncle Degory was...

THE MAN I REMEMBER WAS LOVING, BUT STERN.

SPOILED ME ROTTEN I LATER WOULD LEARN.

BUT OH, I REMEMBER HOW MEAN HE COULD TURN...

[MUSIC shifts to "SOMETHING SO PURE"]

**BRETT:** Was Peter abused? Physically?

**SANDRA:** They each threw their fair share of punches. My mother called their house Madison Square Garden. Y'know, as a joke.

**BRETT:** Was there ever love there?

**SANDRA:** To be honest, it's hard to say. Given what happened. It's very hard to say.

**BRETT:** What happened?

**SANDRA:** The chemical plant. Peter James was the operations manager, and that...that was a mistake.

**BRETT NARRATION:** It was becoming clear that something had happened at that chemical plant, and whatever it was had left a permanent scar on this family. The creation of Helion's chemical plant was Howl's own idea turned against him when instead of making fuel for rocketships, they made bigger bombs. I think back to my last interview with him, about what he said about money and war.

**HOWL: (*Previous tape*)**

THERE IS NOTHING SO PURE IN THE HEART OF MAN  
AS THE HUNGER FOR POWER AND GOLD.

**BRETT NARRATION:** He spent those years after Vietnam running. Was he running away from Degory? His punishing father who valued profits over his own son?

**HOWL: (*Previous tape*)**

INSIDE ME AN ANGER WAS BORN AGAIN  
FOR INJUSTICES I COULDN'T CURE.

**BRETT NARRATION:** Was it the war at home that turned Howl against society at large? The realization that however noble we say our intentions are, human beings will always be seduced and blinded by what they think they can conquer and control? Is that what he thought about the people of Whitetail? About Peregrine and the teens? About me?

**SANDRA:** My father defended him. And often. He told my Uncle that Peter James was not...was not a bad child. He was just different. And I believed that too, because...you see, PJ was five years older than I was, so I followed him around like a puppy dog. There should be a picture in here...

[THE SOUND OF BROKEN PIECES IN A SMALL BOX]

**SANDRA:** What is this? (*She opens it.*) Oh my... This I remember. Yes.

**BRETT NARRATION:** Sandra is holding a small box with broken pieces of plaster of paris. She picks up a piece and moves it thoughtfully through her fingers.

**SANDRA:** I must have been eight years old... and my parents were on Safari, and they didn't take me, which I was dreadfully sore about. And I was left with Aunt Bitsy and Uncle Degory. And it was summer, so Peter James was home from boarding school. And I was being such a brat. And I was so upset that I shattered a plaster cast of Mercy and Charity's hand prints. Their little girls. Awful. I'm ashamed now to remember it. But Peter James took the blame. He told his mother that he had broken it by accident. He was showing it to me, he said, and it dropped. Well, when Uncle Degory came home he...he beat him so badly...so badly.

**BRETT:** Wow.

**SANDRA:** I haven't thought about this in forever. I feel horrible for Peter James. I used to adore him, you have to understand that. I really did. He didn't deserve the things that happened to him when he was young. Not excusing him. But I felt horrible. A few days afterwards, I remember...

HE TOOK ME HIKING  
OUT IN THE WOODS  
OUT BACK IN THE WOODS NEAR OUR HOUSE  
PETER JAMES MADE A FIRE  
DIDN'T USE ANY MATCHES  
I THOUGHT IT WAS MAGIC  
I THOUGHT IT WOULD NEVER GO OUT

I SAT AND LISTENED  
STARED AT THE SKY  
HE TAUGHT ME TO FIND THE NORTH STAR  
PETER JAMES WAS A VISION  
HOW HE'D SIT IN HIS SADNESS  
SO TENDERLY PRESSING HIS SCARS

"PAIN IS GOOD," HE SAID, "HURT IS REAL,  
TO LIVE IS TO FEEL EVERY ACHE THAT YOU FEEL"

AND I WANTED TO  
SIT IN THE DARK WITH HIM  
IN THE DARK WITH HIM  
BOUND IN A BLANKET OF SOOTHING DESPAIR

IN THE DARK WITH HIM  
IN THE DARK WITH HIM  
NO ONE AND NOTHING  
COULD BREAK THROUGH HIS DARKNESS OUT THERE

**BRETT NARRATION:** And there it was -- the thing I had been feeling for a while, but couldn't quite name. The thing that made Howl so alluring to the right people. To Peregrine who lost Jacob. To me who lost my parents. Everyone tells you to move on from grief; Howl is the only one who guides you deeper into it.

I THOUGHT I HAD TO  
PUSH THROUGH THE PAIN  
PUSH HARD THROUGH THE PAIN TILL IT BREAKS  
BUT HE EMBRACES THE SORROW  
HOLDS IT CLOSE FOR PROTECTION  
A MAN WHO RESISTS BEING SAVED

**SANDRA:**

PAIN IS GOOD  
HE THINKS

**BRETT:**

I KNOW...

**SANDRA:**

HURT IS REAL.

**BRETT:**

BUT, OH, I WANT TO FEEL ALL THE ACHE I CAN FEEL...

I WANT TO  
SIT IN THE DARK WITH HIM  
IN THE DARK WITH HIM  
TAKE BACK A LIFETIME OF TEARS NEVER CRIED

IN THE DARK WITH HIM  
IN THE DARK WITH HIM

NO ONE AND NOTHING CAN BREAK THROUGH THIS DARKNESS INSIDE

**SANDRA:** But that's the trick he plays. He acts the victim, but we're the ones who suffer.

**BRETT:** What do you mean?

**SANDRA:** I know what happened in that town, Brett. I read the articles. I know about the boy who died.

**BRETT:** I think he's being scapegoated.

**SANDRA:** I understand wanting to defend him --

**BRETT:** I think that we impose our prejudices on somebody and that --

**SANDRA:** Brett --!

**BRETT:** And that blinds us to who they really are.

**SANDRA:** You don't know who he really is.

**BRETT:** I think I do.

**SANDRA:** But you don't. Trust me, you don't.

**BRETT:**

THERE IS SOMETHING SO PURE  
HOW HE SHUNS THE WORLD  
LIKE HIS DARKNESS MIGHT BE MY REPRIEVE  
EVERY WARNING I'VE HEARD TURNS TO DUST WITH HIS WORDS  
THERE IS NO ROOM FOR DOUBT  
IF I TUNE IT ALL OUT AND BELIEVE

I WANT TO BELIEVE  
IN THE DARK...  
IN THE DARK!

**BRETT:**

BOUND IN A BLANKET OF SOOTHING DESPAIR

**SANDRA:**

BOUND IN A BLANKET OF BLINDING DESPAIR

**BRETT & SANDRA:**

IN THE DARK WITH HIM  
IN THE DARK WITH HIM

**BRETT:**

NO ONE AND NOTHING CAN BREAK THROUGH  
NO ONE AND NOTHING CAN BREAK THROUGH THE DARKNESS  
NO, THERE'S NOTHING CAN BREAK THROUGH

**SANDRA:** Brett!

**BRETT:** (*snapping out*) Yes. Sorry. I'm here.

**SANDRA:** I said come with me. It's time to put this to bed.

[THEY DESCEND INTO A BASEMENT]

**SANDRA:** Hold on to the railing. You're younger than I am, but I need to hold on to the railing. Now you'll see the real collection.

**BRETT NARRATION:** Sandra is taking me down to her basement. By this point we've been talking for nearly five hours. The sunlight is gone. Here in the darkness, the cold, damp Boston winter can't be kept out.

**SANDRA:** It was over here. I know I had it in here, I just need to keep -- what is this? Some of this stuff --

**BRETT NARRATION:** She paws at stacks of boxes looking for what I don't know.

**SANDRA:** Biggest mistake they ever made. Trusting him with the chemical plant.

**BRETT NARRATION:** I was still trying to put all the pieces together: The chemical plant, Howl's relationship with his father, the fact that he went to Vietnam by choice. What was it that Sandra was holding back all these years?

**SANDRA:** My father didn't want to see it. But PJ was the one in charge. He knew what AP could do.

**BRETT NARRATION:** I would find out later that AP stands for Ammonium Perchlorate, a compound used in rocket fuel. It's incredibly unstable, and dangerous to store in large batches.

Sandra finally locates a box of envelopes and begins rifling through them. One with a lot of stamps catches my eye. I pull it out.

**BRETT:** This one's from Peter.

**SANDRA:** No, we're not looking for a letter.

**BRETT:** Can I open it?

**SANDRA:** It's nothing. Forget it.

**BRETT NARRATION:** I open it anyway.

It's dated February, 1988, from Antigua, Guatemala. I quickly glance through and my eyes land on the name Gerda. Howl writes that he's fallen in love, but fears that he will hurt her. A few lines down he asks Sandra to keep his inheritance safe and to use it if she needs. I have so many questions, but not all of them will be answered.

**BRETT:** Why did Peter want you to take care of his inheritance?

**SANDRA:** Because he knew -- deep down he knew he wasn't entitled to any of it!

**BRETT:** I mean it says that --

**SANDRA:** Why should he be entitled? My father died because of what he did. Then he goes off to war, off he goes, and we're left with the pieces.

**BRETT:** What did he do to your father?

**SANDRA:** I'm trying to show you. Look!

**BRETT NARRATION:** Sandra shoves an envelope in my hands. Inside are folded up news articles about a chemical plant explosion in 1966. My mind is racing to keep up. I want to ask Sandra about Gerda, about why Howl thought he might hurt her, but she's become a hurricane, and there's a lot to take in.

**SANDRA:** He knew about the cracks in the drums. The tiny little cracks. He told me!

**BRETT:** What exactly -

**SANDRA:** He told me! He said his father was being cheap - cheap with people. He would scream about it. And PJ saw the books. He was the one in charge. He was the one inspecting the shipments. He knew the drums would leak out.

**BRETT:** These are the tanks of -

**SANDRA:** Of AP, yes. And he knew!

**BRETT:** How do you know that -

**SANDRA:** Because he told me! He screamed about how the cheaper drums would leak, and the storage barns would slowly turn into bombs. Bombs like the ones we sent overseas. Oh, he was so...he was angry. And I said, "You have to tell someone!" It was his job - he had to tell his father, or mine about the cracks. But he kept quiet. And all it took was an electrical spark. And my father...my father and seven other people, all of them dead because he let them die.

**BRETT NARRATION:** Helion paid out millions in settlement and the chemical branch of the company shut down immediately. The articles mention the faulty drums, the danger of storing Ammonium Perchlorate in large quantities, and yet a formal investigation determined the entire thing was an accident. No one was held responsible.

**BRETT:** I don't understand why you're --

**SANDRA:** Because he's tricked you. He's done it again. You think he didn't kill that boy? You might as well be blind! He is an evil man. And he will let you die out of spite and he will call it principle!

**PEREGRINE:**

IF YOU FEEL YOU'VE LOST YOUR STRIDE  
PRINCIPLES CAN BE YOUR GUIDE.  
CONCENTRATE ON WHAT'S INSIDE.  
STAY CLEAR.

**BRETT NARRATION:** I couldn't process everything I had just learned. But I understood what Sandra thought she knew: Howl had let eight people die - his own uncle - in order to spite his father's greed. For Sandra, The acknowledgement of his guilt was in the fact that he enlisted in the Marines and never returned home.

**PEREGRINE:**

PEOPLE MAY NOT UNDERSTAND  
WHY YOU'VE PLANNED THE THINGS YOU'VE PLANNED.  
DO NOT LET THEM TURN YOUR HAND.  
STAY CLEAR.

**BRETT NARRATION:** Human lives hung in the balance, and yet Howl said nothing. His act of omission seemed purposeful and direct. And if he did it once back then, could he do it again? First with Jacob, and now with Peregrine? Punishment for a town who wanted to label him, control him, and throw him away?

**PORTRER:** (*Previous tape*) 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.

**PEREGRINE:**

THE TIME IS NOW TO BLOOM OR BLEED;  
FALL BEHIND OR TAKE THE LEAD.  
ONLY DEATH IS GUARANTEED.

STAY CLEAR.

STAY CLEAR.

**BRETT NARRATION:** That night I left Sandra and rushed to the airport. I wasn't scheduled to leave Boston until the next morning, but I wanted to get back to Whitetail right away.

If only I had waited, I could have flown direct. I wouldn't have gone through Chicago, and gotten stuck in a blizzard heading north.

As it was, when I finally made it to Whitetail, the Final had already begun.

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](http://instrangewoods.com)