

EXT. FOREST - DAY

An ugly day; wind gusting long and hard, the sky is dark and grey above a massive verdant forest stretching out as far as the eye can see.

Shoes trudge through pine needles on the forest floor, followed by A German Shepard's nuzzle sniffing, gliding through the dirt, leaves and pine needles.

A law enforcement badge gleams upon the breast of a "search and Rescue" vest worn by officer JANE SUNDERLAND(30s). She keeps pace with her K-9 partner REB. Jane holds Reb's leash in one hand and a photo in the other. The Photo is a man in his early 40s, a little girl is with him, and wears a very distinct locket around her neck. Reb barks.

JANE
Smell somethin' Reb?

He whines. She pulls out a walkie talkie.

JANE (CONT'D)
This is Officer Sunderland, does anyone copy?

Static.

JANE (CONT'D)
If anyone can hear me, my partner has picked up something and we are proceeding before the storm covers the scent. Over.

Thunder roars, Jane looks up and sees a large smoke stack in the distance that wasn't there before. Reb barks and pulls her in the direction of the smoke.

JANE (CONT'D)
You sure you smell-'em that way boy?

He continues to pull her in that direction and barks.

JANE (CONT'D)
Came this far right Reb? Might as well keep going-

The two press onward towards the ominous smoke stack.

EXT. CABIN FRONT YARD - LATER

The clouds have swollen further, thunder bellows in the distance. The sky's darker and the wind is picking up.

An axe chops a block of wood.

Jane and Reb stumble upon a cabin, its chimney huffing out the smoke she saw earlier. Reb whines and resists going forward with Jane.

JANE
What is it boy?

CHOP.

There's a small stable with a stallion and pony. They both whinny frantically at the sight of her.

CHOP.

There are bird feeders hung all around the property, on the buildings and in the trees. There's chicken coops, a big barn, a fish pond. The place is completely self-sufficient with filters and generators and vegetable gardens.

CHOP.

JANE follows the chopping sound to the back yard, a reluctant Reb following behind on his leash.

EXT. CABIN BACK YARD - CONTINUOUS

KATYA (late 40s) a beautiful woman in farm work clothes is the one chopping.

JANE
Hello?

Her axe chops clean through another log, then faces Jane.

JANE (CONT'D)
I'm sorry for intruding on you
ma'am. I'm officer Jane Sunderland,
with Search and Rescue. This is my
partner, Reb. Is this your property
miss-?

KATYA
Katya. Katya Orosco

Reb growls.

JANE

Reb!

KATYA

It's alright. Poor dear must be famished.

Katya comes forward, pulls a small biscuit out of her pocket. Reb growls, and lets out a vicious bark. Jane pulls him back.

JANE

Hey! I'm so sorry, I've never seen him act like this.

Katya looks intensely into Reb's eyes.

KATYA

(Firmly)

That's enough now.

He whines then sits, not breaking eye contact with Katya. She gives him the treat.

KATYA (CONT'D)

Good boy.

JANE

How did you-

KATYA

I have a way with animals. Now, how did you two end up here?

JANE

It was so foolish, we got separated from our search party when Reb picked up a scent. I didn't want the lead to go with the storm and before we knew it we were lost and for some reason my radio couldn't get through. Then I saw the smoke and hoped it was some campers or something. Hopefully with a phone too.

KATYA

I see. Well, I don't have a phone I'm afraid.

Thunder roars, rain falls.

KATYA (CONT'D)

It looks like it's going to get worse before it gets better.

(MORE)

KATYA (CONT'D)

Won't you and your dog come in?
You're welcome to stay until the
weather clears up.

INT. KATYA'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

A kettle spout pours hot water onto a teabag in a mug.

Jane sits in an arm chair. Reb sits tensely beside her on the floor. The living room is cozy and inviting, save for the taxidermied animals all around, and the walls covered with wallpaper of strange circular symbols.

There is a taxidermied owl mounted on the mantle, it's eyes fixed upon JANE. Katya's Bull Mastiff LUCA also stares at her, sitting and waiting.

JANE

(to Katya)
Nice dog.

KATYA (O.S.)

Don't mind Luca! He may be
intimidating, but he's just a big
softie.

The sound of the rain hitting the glass of the windows and the fire crackling in the fireplace ebb into silence as Jane's gaze is fixated on the owl's. It's as if she is losing herself in the black, glassy void of it's eyes. Reb barks, she snaps out of it.

JANE

Reb, hush!

KATYA (O.S.)

Do you want sugar or cream?

JANE

Just a little sugar is fine, Thank
you!

Katya enters the room with two mugs, hands one to Jane.

JANE (CONT'D)

Thank You very much Ms.Orosco

KATYA

Please, call me Katya, Officer
Sunderland.

JANE

Thank you, Katya. Please, call me Jane.

KATYA

Alright, Jane. So, you're with Search and Rescue, right? Who're you looking for?

Jane pulls the photo of the missing persons from her pocket, hands it to Katya.

JANE

Mason Harrison, and his daughter Cheryl.

KATYA

Poor things. Such a pretty little girl too.

Katya gives the photo back.

JANE

She's only 9. They were expected home from a camping trip two days ago. Their car was still parked in the nature trail parking lot.

KATYA

I see.

Jane looks at the taxidermied owl. Thunder roars. The horses outside whinny loud and erratically.

KATYA (O.S.) (CONT'D)

You are welcome to stay the night here since the weather's not letting up.

JANE

That's so kind, but I really should try to leave. Those two might still be out there.

KATYA

You sure about doing that right now? No use getting you or your handsome partner here killed in this storm.

Lightning flashes, thunder crashes.

JANE

I suppose you're right.

KATYA

Then that settles it. You came just
in time too, I made supper.

INT. KATYA'S KITCHEN - LATER

Jane sits at the table and sips her tea. Katya stands at the stove fixing their plates. Jane examines her surroundings. Portraits of livestock adorn the walls, but no photos of her or any people for that matter. There's also more of the strange circular symbols everywhere, subtly in the background, either recreated in objects or on the walls and furniture.

JANE

You really like animals.

KATYA

Who doesn't?

Reb stares at his full food bowl, his ears pointed down, quietly whines.

KATYA (CONT'D)

I know the circumstances aren't
ideal, but it's always nice to have
new people come through my way. It
doesn't happen that often.

JANE

You have a really great set up
here, you never have to leave for
food or fuel. But it's so isolated
though.

KATYA

It's preferable to dealing with
people.

JANE

You don't get lonely out here?

KATYA

I have my animals, much better than
people.

Katya places a plate of stake in front of Jane. It's deep red juices seep out from beneath it, spreading out along the white plate's surface, like a crime scene.

KATYA (CONT'D)

I hope you like your meat rare.

Katya takes her seat and begins to eat. Jane cuts into the meat, takes a bite and savors the flavor.

JANE

Wow, this is really good!

KATYA

You're too kind, dear. But I could already tell you're someone who goes out of their way to be kind, even to strangers.

JANE

I guess.

KATYA

Don't be so modest. Searching for the lost is very noble. How did you come to be in this profession?

JANE

When I was little, my big brother and I snuck off into the woods while we were on a family camping trip. But it was dark and we ventured too far, and got lost... And he got caught in a stray bear-trap.

I/E. FLASHBACK

JANE(8) and her BROTHER(13) in the woods at night. The brother is on the ground and screams in pain, his foot is caught in a bear trap.

JANE (V.O.)

We were out there for a long time. He got an infection from his injury and was dying before my eyes. I couldn't remember the way back so all I could do was... watch

Jane is frozen in a fetal position, lying next to her brother who's motionless. Watching bugs fly around and into the boy's injury.

JANE (V.O.)

A search and rescue team found us, but my brother didn't make it in the end. The infection got into his blood and-

INT. KATYA'S KITCHEN - NOW

KATYA

I'm so sorry.

JANE

I became a cop to get more directly involved in Search and Rescue. I never wanted anyone else to go through what I went through.

KATYA

You really are special Jane.

JANE

I am?

KATYA

Definitely. Most people become cruel and selfish when they experience tragedy or hardship. No matter how much love or dedication you give to them, to help them heal. They resent or betray you eventually.

JANE

I wouldn't go that far.

KATYA

No? Just look at you, you have a dog for a partner. Why? Because deep down you know animals understand loyalty and gratitude and pure love better than a person ever could.

JANE

Not all people are bad.

KATYA

Perhaps. But, not enough are good either. If humans were more like my animals here, there'd be far less suffering. You'd be far happier as an animal. That's for certain.

JANE

What makes you think I'm unhappy?

KATYA

I know you're unhappy. I could smell it wafting off of you the minute you set foot in this forest.

JANE

As if you could know that-

KATYA

Couldn't I?

Beat.

Jane's stomach gurgles.

JANE

May I use the restroom?

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jane splashes water on her face, then feels for a towel but knocks over a small, lidded, dish to the floor. Jane wipes her face with her sleeve, then goes to pick up what fell over and finds a necklace with a very familiar pendant. Jane picks it up, examines it, then takes out the photo of the Masons and sees that it's the same necklace in the photo.

INT. KATYA'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Jane returns, but she's not looking so good.

KATYA

Feeling alright, dear?

JANE

I think something isn't right.

KATYA

Oh? I can make you a different tea, something for the stomach-

JANE

No. No, tea, thank you.

KATYA

Something else is troubling you.

JANE

There's another reason we came this way and it wasn't just to find a phone.

KATYA

Oh?

JANE

Right before your smoke cloud appeared and I lost radio contact, Reb caught the scent of the missing father. The one I told you about, and he followed that scent right to your residence.

KATYA

Is that so?

JANE

And I happened upon this in the bathroom, just by chance-

Hold's out the pendant.

JANE (CONT'D)

It's a custom pendant, no another like it. It also belonged to the little girl.

KATYA

I found it while foraging. Perhaps she dropped it?

JANE

I thought so too for a moment, but that doesn't really follow either. Reb followed the trail directly here. Out of anywhere else in this entire forest, he came here. If they left here or even came around it, Reb would have picked that up, lead me there, not here, which tells me one thing.

KATYA

And that is?

JANE

That they came here, and never left.

Beat.

KATYA

They were such kind people, just like yourself Jane. They said how much they liked me. He told me how I reminded him of his late wife.

(MORE)

KATYA (CONT'D)

I couldn't bear to say goodbye to such a lovely, lonely man and his sweet little girl. So I made sure I didn't have too.

Jane's become paler, drenched in sweat and her vision's becoming hazy.

KATYA (CONT'D)

You don't look so good dear-

Jane falls over in pain onto the floor, writhes in agony.

JANE

Wh-what did you do to me...to them?
Where's Reb?

KATYA

Don't worry dear, I'll take good care of your handsome boy. He'll make a great addition to the family.

JANE

P-People will come look for me, they'll find this place and-

KATYA

I very much doubt that. You only found me because I allowed it.

Katya drags Jane out of the bathroom by her legs as she screams and thrashes in pain.

KATYA (CONT'D)

There, there, don't be afraid of making noise dear, scream as loud as you want. No one will hear it anyway.

EXT. BACK YARD - CONTINUOUS

Katya drags Jane, whose hands and feet are bound, through the mud and rain to the stables, lightning flashes illuminating the disturbing scene.

JANE

HELP ME! SOMEONE-AAAAAAAH

INT. STABLES - CONTINUOUS

Katya lights an oil lamp. Jane is sobbing and thrashing about, something starts cracking. Her bones. Her hands contort in bizarre ways.

KATYA

Don't cry dear, you aren't alone.
You're with your friends now too
see?

She gestures to the horse and pony.

Katya takes the Mason's pendant from her pocket and hangs it around the pony's neck.

JANE

Oh God-

INT. STABLE WALL - CONTINUOUS

JANE's shadow is cast upon the wall of the stable. Her silhouette shifts shape, followed by the sounds of bones cracking and flesh tearing. Her hand morphs into the shape of a horse's leg, like the transformation scene in Disney's Pinocchio. Jane's screams become horse whinnies. The transformation is complete.

INT. STABLE - CONTINUOUS

Where a human Jane once lied, now a horse in her place. Katya undoes the rope binding what once was her hands and feet.

KATYA

Now we can be together forever
dear. All of us. Don't you feel so
much more at peace now?

Jane's eyes reflect Katya closing the stable door. Jane makes noise faintly resembles that of sobbing. The Thunder roars and the rain pours, drowning her cries out. Reb comes out to her stable and scratches at the door. Unable to do anything, he lies, resided, beside her stable door.

END