

BADLANDS COLA - 105 - “BURIED”

Content Warning: Badlands Cola is intended for a mature audience. Content warnings for each episode are available in the show notes and on our website, badlandscola.com. We recommend you check them out to ensure your listening experience is fun *and* safe. Thank you.

Pre-Roll: Hey everyone! Creator Renee here to let you know once again (yep, you guessed it) you’re gonna want to listen through all the way to the end of this episode because we have another fabulous trailer for you. This time, from SPECTRE.

SPECTRE is a new sci-fi space opera audio drama that explores the expanses of unknown space, throwing the characters into hijinks and shenanigans while also solving a larger, overarching problem with military overstep and unchecked technological growth.

Listen, the sound design is impeccable, the ensemble cast beyond charming...if you’ve got a sci-fi itch, this one is for you, I promise.

All right, and that’s it for me. Let’s get you back to the Badlands!

SCENE 105.1

MUSIC THEME: “FEW COLOURS” BY OTNO. An ominous, building track featuring a wary electric guitar and the keens of a theremin.

STRATHCONA: *(To the audience)* Badlands Cola. Episode Five: BURIED.

FADE IN.

EXT. DRIVE-IN DINER - LATE NIGHT - D3

The hot night seems to wrap itself around the empty parking lot of the local drive-in diner. Vintage country MUSIC licks out from low-quality speakers, its dizzy rhythms barely audible over the midnight DRONE of cicadas and crickets. SUNNY is here waiting. Eventually, a MUSTANG pulls in from the road and PARKS nearby.

STRATHCONA: What's up, gumshoe.

SUNNY: You didn't have to come. Don't you have a radio station to babysit?

STRATHCONA: And miss a chance to hit up the diner? I cued up a solid hour of psychedelic rock, I'm officially on break.

SUNNY: If you say so. *(Grudgingly)* Thanks for recommending this place, haven't had a proper meal since I got here.

As the two near the drive-in counter proper, sounds of an unbusy kitchen can be heard through open ordering windows: a grill SIZZLING, crockery CLATTERING, dishes being WASHED, bored CHATTER between young staff.

STRATHCONA: Well, paleontology centre's closed, so might as well show you our second best tourist attraction. *(Referring to the menu)* What do you want?

SUNNY: Oh, um. *(Reading menu)* I don't know. cheeseburger sounds pretty good.

...What, does this mean we're suddenly friends or something?

STRATHCONA: Absolutely not. I just don't hate you enough to let you starve. Yet. Fries?

SUNNY: Why not.

STRATHCONA: Great.

(To the DINER CASHIER) Two cheeseburger combos, and a...milkshake. Cherry, please. Thanks.

DINER CASHIER: Coming right up. That'll be eighteen-twenty-five, please.

Coins JINGLE, bounce off the plastic counter.

SUNNY: Oh. Please don't pay.

STRATHCONA: Not a big deal.

SUNNY: You're making me break a rule.

STRATHCONA: The rule that says don't take cheeseburgers from strangers?

SUNNY: The rule that says *never accept gifts from informants*.

STRATHCONA: *(Under breath)* "Informants." Oof.

Just take the free burger, and tell me what you found at the paleontology centre.

SUNNY: I found a paleontologist.

STRATHCONA: *(Deadpan)* Wow. Incredible. How much do they pay you again?

SUNNY: A paleontologist acting *strangely*.

STRATHCONA: Yeah, no, that still doesn't narrow it down.

DINER CASHIER: Here you go: two cheese combos and a cherry malt.

STRATHCONA: Thanks, kid.

(To SUNNY) All right, you can tell me all about Sunny's Day at Dinoland, but first we eat. Here.

SUNNY: The milkshake's for me?

STRATHCONA: Not gonna let you come to the drive-in and not get a milkshake. Besides, I'm already set...

A glass bottle CLINKS musically in STRATHCONA's hands, then FIZZES as the cap is CRACKED off.

SUNNY: What is *that*?

STRATHCONA: May I present, "Badlands Cola."

SUNNY: Ugh.

STRATHCONA: Town's attempt at making its own brand of pop, back in the 70s when this place was really booming. You know, upsell to tourists in gas stations, that sort of thing. It never caught on, of course, so the town ended up just giving away crates of the

stuff. It's my personal goal to work through the surviving stock. Be impressed.

SUNNY: Yeah, is that dust on the glass? That...that has got to be expired.

STRATHCONA: Definitely. And free. Cheers.

SUNNY and STRATHCONA walk to the Mustang, where they SIT on the car's still-toasty hood and UNWRAP their dinners from greasy paper.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Just past midnight, we sit on the hood of Strathcona's Mustang and devour our cheeseburgers like a couple of broke college kids with nowhere better to be.

The food drips grease through its checker-print paper, tastes completely mediocre, and yet somehow manages to be the best thing I've eaten in months. I almost forget about the man sitting beside me, in the same flannel he was wearing when I fetched him out of the Moon house, brooding and chugging bootleg pop like he's getting paid to do both.

This isn't the first time I've seen him up close, but it is the first time I'm not desperately trying to ignore what I see. There are...details that I missed: a face worn and toughened by sun, despite his seemingly nocturnal lifestyle; long limbs that I can't quite picture cramped up in that awful bus, and some of the most dreadful shoulder-crunching, lumbar-torturing posture I've ever seen.

He swallows a mouthful of burger, then catches me from the corner of his eye.

STRATHCONA: So. The paleontologist let you in?

SUNNY: Well. I, uh. Kinda. Broke in.

STRATHCONA: Just non-stop crime with you, eh?

SUNNY: Hey, no one here locks their doors. And there's literally just the one paleontologist up there; Doctor Gillespie.

STRATHCONA: Ah. The one giving me updates on the closure.

SUNNY: He was...not a fan of my barging in. But, you know, normal enough. Until the subject of Jasper Moon came up.

STRATHCONA: Is that surprising to you? It's a touchy subject for this town.

SUNNY: It wasn't just a touchy subject. Gillespie knew someone who was directly involved with the Moon cult. Another paleontologist named, uh, Levesque.

STRATHCONA: ...Oh.

SUNNY: Wait, did you know him?

STRATHCONA: *(Matter of fact)* Small town. Everyone knows everyone. He's also dead.

SUNNY: Yeah, Doctor Gillespie told me, but that's all I could get out of him. How did it happen? Was it the cult?

STRATHCONA: That's the leading theory. Probably even more so now that Jasper's behind bars. No one really knows the details.

Jasper brought his people out to the Badlands one night, and some of them never came back. Levesque went missing that night; wrong place, wrong time, maybe. Like I said, it was never proven.

SUNNY: You're talking about the Sparville Incident, aren't you? I mean, that's what my handler calls it.

STRATHCONA: So you *have* done some research.

SUNNY: What little I can get my hands on. The department refuses to declassify the details, all I know is that four people ate it in the desert, and Jasper was involved. That's it. I want to know if you've heard more.

STRATHCONA: Remember how I said the cult was a touchy subject?

SUNNY: Yes?

STRATHCONA: The Sparville Incident is a giant, festering *wound* of a subject.

SUNNY: So what? Just add it to the pile of other incredibly fucked up things you refuse to talk about?

STRATHCONA: Hey, I told you about Mel, didn't I? If I think you're missing something important, I'll tell you.

SUNNY: Sure you will. So, Levesque's just another dead end, then. (*Exasperated*) Why did I think you would be helpful tonight?

STRATHCONA: Why indeed.

The two EAT in slightly awkward silence.

SUNNY: Why are you still here?

STRATHCONA: ...What?

SUNNY: I mean, you're...what, mid-thirties? No kids, no mortgage. You work a job you hate at a radio station that no one listens to. Your only friend appears to be a geriatric woman with an RV park and a gun. You live in a bus. All that against a backdrop of desert murder and dinosaur bone cults.

STRATHCONA: *(Pause, slightly stunned by SUNNY's bluntness)*
D...Dude.

SUNNY: Sorry. *Sorry.* Force of habit. It's my job to squeeze people for details, remember?

STRATHCONA: Is this a cross-examination, or the world's worst attempt at small talk?

SUNNY: The latter. I just can't figure out why you'd stay.

STRATHCONA: I don't know.

SUNNY: Is there a single question you won't dodge?

STRATHCONA: I'm not...Look, I'm not dodging this time. I just...don't have an answer. I know you've seen the worst this town has to offer, but it's had its fair share of good people, too.

SUNNY: Would Melinda Moon fall under that category?

STRATHCONA: Yeah. I think she would. But I also think it's been a long time.

SUNNY: Doesn't it freak you out? Looking back at things, I mean. Knowing what you know now.

STRATHCONA: What, like being friends with a Moon kid?

SUNNY: I don't know, like being within sniffing distance of one of the most dangerous cults in Canada's history.

STRATHCONA: Look, Mel...Mel and I were kids. We were doing our own thing, it didn't affect us.

SUNNY: And when you got older?

STRATHCONA: I told you: Mel moved away, and then Jasper did too. People lose touch. I wasn't exactly inviting him over for dinner, if that's what you're asking.

SUNNY: So you're saying everything was totally fine and good and normal?

STRATHCONA: Well...

SUNNY: (*Pushing*) You're telling me whatever happened in that house yesterday never happened to you before?

STRATHCONA: Oh my god, the house again...

SUNNY: But it *has* happened to you before! I heard you tell Hawthorne it was "getting worse." You called it a rabbit hole. What does that mean?

STRATHCONA: *(Pause, frustrated)* This town, it...things happen here that aren't easy to explain.

SUNNY: Try me.

The sounds of the world seem to EBB, fading into the long night.

Music: Familiar warbling guitar chords, but muted and bloated, as if underwater.

STRATHCONA: *(Sighing)* Have you ever been in a high school gym when all the lights are turned off? Or laid down in the middle of a parking lot at three in the morning? Flat on your back on the asphalt? And it's like...like you're the only person alive, like time just skips over you and the parking lot goes on forever in every direction. If you looked away, that little patch of the world would stop existing, and when you looked back, it would be just...just slightly different than you remembered?

SUNNY: Maybe?

STRATHCONA: That's this town. That's the Moon house.

The MUSIC recedes like a memory; the ambience of the world returns.

STRATHCONA: ...What?

SUNNY: Still profoundly unhelpful.

STRATHCONA: Right, I forgot, you only care about evidence and leads.

SUNNY: *(Cheerfully)* Well, they're all I got. Okay? That, and opportunistic break-ins.

STRATHCONA: Well, do us both a favour and get some sleep before you go busting into the next informant's house. I'm not reviving you with a free milkshake every time you work yourself into the ground. Get off my car.

The MUSTANG bounces quietly as SUNNY slides off.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* The hood of the Mustang is warm, and as the exhaustion of my long day kicks in, I find it a minor struggle to ease down off the grill with my half-melted milkshake in hand. The calories from my midnight dinner probably aren't making it any easier; suddenly, all I can think of is my lumpy motel bed.

I look to see if Strathcona's slipping into a food coma right along with me, but no. He's tired, sure, but there's a strange edge to the way he gathers up his cheeseburger wrappings, slams the Mustang door behind him.

It's not just the fact that my existence annoys him — I'm used to that by now — but something else. Even in the dim light cast by the Drive-In's neon signs, I can see his hackles raising from a mile away.

SUNNY: Hey, where are you headed?

STRATHCONA: Back to the Raptor. *(Pause)* There's something I need to check out.

The MUSTANG pulls away into the night.

Music: Hesitant, curious bass.

FADE TO BLACK.

SCENE 105.2

FADE IN.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - MORNING - D4

SUNNY's motel room is full of sun, insects SINGING their morning songs quietly outside.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* I declare war on cheeseburgers - the food coma after my late night diner feast is real. After sleeping like a corpse, it's a struggle to wake up in time to polish off some paperwork. Compiling my notes, transcribing the best soundbytes from my hours and hours of wire recording. And when I go to send it all to my Detective back home...nothing. Internet shortage, something the motel concierge couldn't explain or provide a fix for, which is—

The muffled BLIP of a walkie-talkie, buried somewhere in SUNNY's backpack.

SUNNY: *(Whispered)* What the hell...?

HAWTHORNE: *(Over walkie-talkie)* Come in, Strathcona. Over.

SUNNY: What...? Oh god, where is that...

SUNNY strides over to the backpack on the table. They procure the walkie-talkie in the middle of HAWTHORNE's next sentence, the signal much LOUDER and CLEARER in the open.

HAWTHORNE: (*More stressed*) Strathcona, come in, please. Over.

SUNNY: The walkie-talkie?

HAWTHORNE: Strath, this is Hawthorne, come in, damn it!...Over.

SUNNY hits the TRANSMIT BUTTON on the device.

SUNNY: Hawthorne? From Blue Dunes?

HAWTHORNE: Who in the hell is this? Over.

SUNNY: (*Already annoyed*) This is Sunny. I found your missing radio jockey? Brought him to your camp ground? Ate your roast dinner?

HAWTHORNE: Huh. Are you with Strath right now, or—?

SUNNY: What? No. You gave me this walkie-talkie.

HAWTHORNE: Oh, shoot. I did do that, eh? Well, you should give it back.

SUNNY: I—Fine. Sure. I'll drop it off at Blue Dunes today.

HAWTHORNE: And if you do see Strathcona, tell him I need him here *yesterday*.

SUNNY: Can't you reach him?

HAWTHORNE: What do you think I'm trying to do right now? He's not picking up, okay? It is *urgent*. I can't find Gary, and I have looked just about everywhere, and I am fit to be tied.

SUNNY: Okay, hold on, someone's missing?

HAWTHORNE: Not it's not someone — you know what, never you mind! It's no skin off your nose. Just drop off the walkie-talkie when you can, please. Over.

The walkie BLIPS a final time, signaling a hasty end to a strange conversation.

SUNNY: *(To self)* I don't think we're over just yet, Hawthorne.

FADE TO BLACK.

SCENE 105.3

FADE IN.

EXT. BLUE DUNES CAMPGROUND - MORNING - D4

SUNNY slams their truck door shut and strides into BLUE DUNES CAMPGROUND, gravel CRUNCHING. BIRDS chirp merrily in the still-pleasant morning sun, and the CAMPERS are already stirring as they ready their FIRES and grills for coffee and breakfast sausages. Somewhere, a DOG plays happily with a CHILD.

SUNNY: Hawthorne? Hawthorne?

HAWTHORNE: *(Distant)* That you, Sunny? I'm out in the back! Just leave the walkie on the picnic table!

SUNNY: Out back where? Of the house? Hawthorne, I'm coming around; I want to ask you about this Gary person — *(nearly tripping)* oh, shit!

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* A garden of holes.

That's what I nearly step right into as I round the corner of Hawthorne's mobile home, nearly shattering my ankle in a foot-deep hole in her gravelly back yard: one of a dozen, all seemingly dug by the owner of Blue Dunes herself, who is presently on her knees in the dirt with a bent trowel in one hand and a walkie-talkie in the other.

HAWTHORNE: Watch your step! I told you to leave it out front!

SUNNY: Hawthorne, what are you doing back here?

HAWTHORNE: *(Upset)* I am looking for Gary.

SUNNY: Oh God. Is Gary a dead body?

HAWTHORNE: Very funny.

SUNNY: It's not! It's not funny!

HAWTHORNE: What, you don't remember her? You met her up close and personal just the other day.

SUNNY: *(Realisation dawning)* If you tell me that Gary is the name of your gun—

HAWTHORNE: Gary is my rifle, yes.

SUNNY: Oh, Jesus, this town!

HAWTHORNE: It is better than a body, is it not?

SUNNY: Barely! A backyard is a terrible place to keep a gun.

HAWTHORNE: Well, I don't like having her in the house! Makes me itchy. So I bury her out here, I dig her up when I need her. It's usually never a problem.

SUNNY: Except now she — *it* is missing. Which I'm pretty sure is a federal crime not to report.

HAWTHORNE: Well! Are you gonna help me find her? Or are you gonna be an accomplice to a federal crime?

SUNNY: What...you want me to dig?

HAWTHORNE: Oh, Jesus, darling, would you? I know I owe you one for rescuing Strathcona, but there are families on this campground; I'd be sick if Gary got into the wrong hands. Do it for the children?

SUNNY: I'll do it to save you from the negligence lawsuit, how about that.

HAWTHORNE: I will take that.

SUNNY *kneels down and begins to SCRAPE and SCOOP at the dry soil, the trowel barely more help than their own bare hands.*

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* I take up one of Hawthorne's rusty trowels, and begin to scrape at the harsh, bone-dry dirt in search of a rifle that Hawthorne probably left in her car by accident. As I churn up scoops up earth, I remember that I wanted to be a paleontologist as a kid. I don't know, an old irrelevant memory, like suddenly

hearing the theme song to your favourite show after a decade. Baby Sunny might have thought digging around in the Badlands was the coolest thing possible, regardless of whether I was looking to unearth a fossil or a firearm.

And then my arm starts to ache, and I think about reports and evidence and dossiers, and the memory is scraped away.

SUNNY: I assume you still can't get a hold of Strathcona?

HAWTHORNE: You honestly think I'd take your skinny little arms over him? No. He must have slept in. He's been under a lot of stress lately.

SUNNY: Oh, gee, so he's not this surly all the time, then?

HAWTHORNE: (*Amused*) Oh? Has Strathcona not been *informant* enough for your tastes?

SUNNY: He's a black box. He says he wants help finding Melinda Moon, then refuses to talk about her, or her family, or her house.

HAWTHORNE: I can imagine....You haven't tried asking me anything yet.

SUNNY: I... didn't realise you knew the Moons well.

HAWTHORNE: Shoot, I remember the day the Moons moved into town.

SUNNY: Jasper and Melinda?

HAWTHORNE: Oh, goodness no, darling; I a old. I remember their *parents* coming to town. They were a young couple from the next village over, struck it rich off coal and mostly inheritance. When the coal industry finally gave up the ghost mid-century, I suppose the Moons moved out here for comfy suburbia in a tourist town.

SUNNY: What do you remember about them?

HAWTHORNE: I try not to concern myself with upper-crust folks, if you catch my meaning. But I do remember the kids well enough.

SUNNY: Well, yeah; one of them's a murderous cult leader.

HAWTHORNE: (*Upset sigh*)

SUNNY's trowel THUDS quietly to the ground.

SUNNY: Look, I think we need to admit Gary is missing.

HAWTHORNE: You're probably right. Let's go warn the families staying here, then.

SUNNY: No, Hawthorne, wait, I want to know more about the Moon kids.

HAWTHORNE: Well, then why don't you come walking with me, and we can warn the nice families about Gary together?

SUNNY: Fine. Lead the way, camp mistress.

HAWTHORNE: Ha! *Camp mistress.*

The two pair up and WALK up the path to the campground proper, the distant sounds of FIRES, TENTS ZIPPING, ADULTS CHATTERING, and DOGS barking coming steadily closer.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* We crunch up the long, crooked path to the camp sites, a few drought-strangled trees throwing what little shade they can across candy-coloured nylon tents and muddy RVs. The campers are still getting their days under them, and the dry desert air is thick with the scent of cowboy coffee and breakfast sausages on open fires.

The campers' reactions to the unfortunate news about "Gary the Gun" range from wide-eyed motherly shock, to stoner shrugs and laughs. No one has seen the missing hunting rifle. Everyone hopes we find it "real soon."

The proximity to citizens makes questioning even more difficult, and I find myself muttering in snatches to Hawthorne as we slink from site to site, ducking under clotheslines and avoiding overzealous retrievers.

SUNNY: So, back to murderous cult leader and co. You were familiar with Jasper and Melinda?

HAWTHORNE: Well, before. Back when they were just babies. I actually recruited one of them to the Park Wardens. We always needed an extra pair of hands, and truthfully, kids don't complain about chores too loudly as long as you let them bump along on a pony every once in a while.

SUNNY: Was it Jasper?

HAWTHORNE: No, I never could get him to come out. But I did snag Melinda. Kid was a genius when it came to keeping our comms equipment in shape. And of course, wherever Mel went, Strathcona followed.

SUNNY: Strathcona was a park warden, too? For how long?

HAWTHORNE: Oh, well, see, Melinda only lasted a summer or two. Eventually decided to leave town. I have no idea where to. Strath stayed for...well. Long as he could, I suppose.

SUNNY: And then?

HAWTHORNE: And then what?

SUNNY: Well, Strathcona isn't a warden anymore. You retired out of the job, but what about him?

HAWTHORNE: We called it quits on the very same day. But...that ain't my story to tell.

SUNNY: What happened?

HAWTHORNE: *(Distracted, worried)* Oh, fiddlesticks.

SUNNY: Hawthorne? Hello?

HAWTHORNE: I forgot about this camper.

SUNNY: Who are you talking about? Where are you pointing...

HAWTHORNE: *(Sheepish)* That fellow, sitting outside the RV with the purple and yellow stripes. He's not my biggest fan. Why don't you talk to him.

SUNNY: Hawthorne, wait, who is that?

HAWTHORNE: See you around kid, thanks for your help!

SUNNY: Hawthorne!

HAWTHORNE BUSTLES off, leaving SUNNY to approach the mystery camper.

SUNNY: *(To the CAMPER)* Um. Hey there! Morning! I'm here to let you know that there's been a...

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* The camper looks up from their coffee and magazine, and I realise we've already met.

SUNNY: *(Stunned)* Doctor Gillespie.

DR. GILLESPIE: Aren't you popping up in the strangest places.

SUNNY: The best investigators always do.

DR. GILLESPIE: I hate it.

SUNNY: So, funny story, this is super awkward, but Hawthorne asked me to—

DR. GILLESPIE: Ah. Hawthorne. Is she part of your "investigation?"

SUNNY: Why do you ask?

DR. GILLESPIE: What about Strathcona?

SUNNY: What?

DR. GILLESPIE: *Strathcona?* The man on the radio. Look, I heard you and Hawthorne talking about him earlier.

SUNNY: Um, I mean, he's cooperating with my investigation, I guess. Aren't you the one that calls him up to tell him if the centre's open or not?

DR. GILLESPIE: Only because I have to. I think you would do well to keep that man at arm's length, too.

SUNNY: (*Cautious*) What do you mean?

DR. GILLESPIE: Listen. You wanted to know about Doctor Levesque? Jasper Moon killed him.

SUNNY: Yeah, during the Sparville Incident, right?

DR. GILLESPIE: My god, if you insist on making such a spectacle of it, sure, call it that. Levesque went out to try to talk sense into Mr. Moon, and it cost him his life.

SUNNY: I'm sorry. I'm still learning details about that night. I don't understand what this has to do with Strathcona.

DR. GILLESPIE: He was there.

Music: *Slow, predatory piano keys, muffled and bassy.*

SUNNY: *(Disbelieving)* What?

DR. GILLESPIE: You want to know the rest? I can't tell you; I didn't see. Maybe your new friend Strathcona will see fit to fill you in — if you can convince yourself to trust a word he says.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Normally, the cab of my truck is a sanctuary after an intel bomb like that. Vision narrowing to a pinprick focus as my lap becomes a sea of hastily scrawled notes and ideas, fingers trembling slightly from the rush. But now, my hands are rigid on my steering wheel, my blood feeling a whole lot like cement in my heart. There's no need for notes, of course: my wire hasn't moved since I promised Strathcona I wouldn't use it.

SUNNY turns the key in the ENGINE and DEPARTS the peaceful campsite. The music fades away.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* I'm speeding, probably. Every kilometre that flings by, I can hear Doctor Gillespie's warning echoing in my ears.

Trust is such a fucking pain. All this time, I've taken everyone at their word. Hawthorne, Doctor Gillespie; yes, even Strathcona. And sure, this case — hell, this whole *town's* been tough to crack, but that's how things are supposed to be: everyone is protective of their private lives. It's literally why I have a job. Even when those privacies mutate into secrets, secrets that can hurt people, tear lives apart, that's still just a slow Tuesday for a PI like me.

But...this is the first time an informant of mine has had such a dark shadow cast over them. The notion that Strathcona was there on that day in the Badlands, when four people died and my handler won't even tell me how or why...it doesn't just throw a wrench into

my trust in Strathcona as a credible source, it shakes my very idea of him as a person.

A cold feeling starts to creep over me as I drive. For a long, blank moment, I feel lost, until I realise where my aimless navigating has brought me.

SUNNY PARKS their truck, turning off the ENGINE before just...sitting. Watching. Understanding.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* The Moon house. It's still here, almost mocking the fact that anyone had ever believed it to be otherwise. Nothing has changed: the windows are still dark, the neglected flower beds still dead, too dry to rot. Everything is just the same as it was on that strange day when Strathcona and I first met.

Unbidden, the memory of Strathcona's face appears, of the terror in his eyes as he pressed up against the glass just two days ago. Then, the memory of my first visit: the forgotten furniture, the shredded wallpaper, the awful, impossible, double basements...

No. There's only one person I can trust. Was only ever one. Me. I'm going in.

The truck door OPENS, though the usual SUBURBAN ambience is strangely muted this morning. Midweek lull?

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* I skip the backdoor. If this place really is untouched, the front door should still be unlocked.

The front door of the Moon House opens and closes with an almost welcoming CLICK. Still unlocked. INSIDE, the MUTED quality of the

air seems to thicken with every step, a secret tension rising up as SUNNY explores deeper...

SUNNY: *(Calling out)* This place still empty? I'm — wait, what?

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* The door to the basement...the second one, that I found the first time I was here. It's *gone*. Circling the main floor, I double-check, and — yes, the first basement is still here. But the second...

I was confused, I guess. I guess? I was somewhere I wasn't supposed to be and I got turned around. There is only one basement in this house. *There is only one basement in this house.* That's better, right? Yeah.

SUNNY's FOOTSTEPS are soft and cautious, and they cringe every time their heel SCUFFS on the naked floors.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* I move on: to the east side of the house, where the bedrooms should be. Would have been my first stop last time, if I hadn't gotten so spooked.

First one's to my right; it looks like the parents' bedroom. It's empty, apart from the phantom outlines of furniture along the walls. There's dirt on the floor. Everything's so dry it's impossible to tell how fresh. From Strathcona, maybe?

The closer I look, the more dirt I see. A trail leads from the first bedroom to the second. Not tracks, more like...soil falling from a wheelbarrow or something. The second bedroom is...empty, too, but it feels nicer in here. Less cold, somehow. Someone tore down the old wallpaper and painted the walls to look like a sunset. Somehow, I

can't imagine such a bright, happy room belonging to Jasper Moon, which would mean it's Melinda's.

If this was Melinda's room, then where is—

A sudden SHUDDERING THUD from somewhere else in the abandoned home, stopping SUNNY dead in their tracks and steeling the TENSION in the air.

SUNNY: What the...?

SUNNY: Hello? ...Strathcona? *(Under breath)* Shit.

No reply. Slowly, cautiously, SUNNY makes their CREAKY way from the bedroom wing back to the central area; to the basement door.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* There's nothing here. Nowhere anything could be hiding. Except the one basement, with its single door.

This is so stupid. No one is here but me. And if Jasper had a bedroom anywhere in this house, it was probably in the basement, because that's where older brothers go, right?

I approach it, the same way I did when I first broke into this house through the backyard. The door here is still open to the stairs below. The way down looks darker than ever.

A light switch FLICKS repeatedly: no dice.

SUNNY: No power, of course. Oh, where's my phone *(turning on phone light)*...there. Some light, at least. Yeah, here we go, here we go...

The steps give up CREAKS of warning as SUNNY descends. They go on for a long while. Alerted, SUNNY stops for a moment.

SUNNY: How deep does this thing go...?

There are more stairs. Then, impossibly: more. A low, hunting DRONE rises.

SUNNY: What the hell? This can't be right... *(Slightly heavy breathing as they continue)*

The air THICKENS, as if true depths are being reached, atmospheric pressure rising...until SUNNY comes to the landing suddenly and all is well again.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* The basement reeks of angsty teen boy bedroom. Still no furniture, but half the wood-paneled walls down here have been painted black, and I can still see the ripped corners from old band posters.

And...a television, complete with VCR.

SUNNY kneels before their discovery: a pile of VHS TAPES, stacked like a tiny, tawdry offering to the monolithic TV crammed into the basement corner. After a moment, the TV BLIPS to life at a button press.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Not only is there a VCR, I realise: there are tapes. Four of them, labelled in no particular order: "Sorry Doctor." "Beacon." "Instructions." And one with no label at all. I should take these back as evidence, but I sure as hell don't have a VCR of my own to view them on.

So...I start with "Sorry Doctor."

SUNNY feeds the TAPE into the VCR, resulting in STATIC on-screen.

SUNNY: What am I doing, what am I doing, what am I doing...Oh, wait. Rewind.

The TAPE is frantically REWOUND, the on-screen footage hopelessly GARBLED until the view clears and its contents can be seen...

JASPER MOON: *(On VHS tape 1)* Hello. It's me.

SUNNY: *(Whispered)* Oh, shit.

JASPER MOON: *(On VHS tape 1)* We're doing such great work here, baby. Mom and Dad would be so proud. To think that I'm so close to finishing what our family started so many years ago, that the Moon legacy might finally be realised?

(Emotional) I wish you could see it. And you can. You can. Just one final favour. That's all I ask.

And yes, I found your fancy city address. How hard do you think it was to track down a Dr. Moon?

The already glitchy TAPE quality DISSOLVES rapidly, JASPER MOON's voice swallowed by STATIC until the tape runs out with a CLICK.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Evidence. Finally. As I cram the first tape into my bag and swap in the second, I am almost giggling with relief. Oh my god, Nicholson is gonna lose his mind when he sees this. Alright...

A second TAPE goes into the VCR, is quickly REWOUND and PLAYED.

JASPER MOON: *(On VHS tape 2. Shaking with anger)* Silence. I'm perplexed. I speak to my faithful here, and ask them: How can she pretend? Does she think she can just bury it? Did our parents, *their* parents, teach her nothing?

But they were quick to clear my eyes, because if we're honest, it's just like you. To bury and forget. You have secrets, too. I kept them for you, when no one else would dare, and now when I need you, you're silent? Is that *your* legacy? **ANSWER ME!**

The tape runs out into more STATIC. SUNNY JAMS in the next TAPE with urgency.

SUNNY: Jesus. Okay. Tape number three.

JASPER MOON: *(On VHS tape 3)* I am doing my best not to be cruel, baby. I am being hunted like a dog in this filthy city, and we are all under a great deal of stress.

Do you still believe me, like you used to? Hate me if it helps, but tell me you still believe in the world I am trying to build. It's at hand, Melinda. Believe that.

Music: A deep percussive heartbeat of a drum...

JASPER MOON: *(On VHS tape 3)* Along with this tape are my last prayers for that world: you will find a set of instructions. If you still believe, if you're still a Moon in your heart, then you must build the beacon. And then you must dig. You know what for. I've sent you all the money I have left so that you might hire the help you require — heaven knows there are plenty of money-grubbing amateur teams

eager to go rooting around in the Badlands — but you must ensure *you're* the one carrying this out, Melinda. Only a Moon can sift through the Mud.

You know what awaits us at the end. The echoes that will be heard for the first time in eons. Don't let that dream die with me.

The music dies. The TAPE EJECTS with a robotic WHIR.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* The final tape has no label.

The final TAPE goes in...

MELINDA MOON: *(On VHS tape 4)* I did it.

Music: A new sound; the low, keening wail of a vintage guitar, followed by a descending piano theme.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* The flickering image on the screen stuns me, and for a moment, I forget why I'm even down here.

In the video's frame is a woman. She's sitting exactly where I'm sitting, right now. Muscular, razor-edged, and perfectly still with terror. Her hands are strong and calm in her lap, but there's a pressure to her mouth that makes my stomach drop. She has the exact same coyote eyes as Jasper. Moon eyes.

MELINDA MOON: *(On VHS tape 4, hesitant, numb)* It's weak, but I have a plan to strengthen it. And I hired a dig team. Started excavation right where you said. We found the first specimens you buried, which means your plan worked after all. Grandpa would have been on his knees.

We'll wait for the final fossil, just as you instructed, but...you didn't warn me. That the door would open again. To what?

What are we unleashing? Jasper, the bones are already ringing —

Something strange is happening on-screen. There is the sound of unmistakable PRESENCE in the on-screen room, the very room SUNNY sits in. Somewhere, something begins to RING...

SUNNY: What? God, these...What's happening? Why isn't she moving?

The RINGING intensifies. SUNNY punches the EJECT button on the VCR, banishing the frightening footage — but the RINGING does not go away with it.

SUNNY: What the hell?
(Frightened) Shit, shit!

SUNNY FLINGS up the stairs, leaving us behind. The RINGING continues, crescendos, then slowly, reluctantly ABATES.

In the RUMBLING quiet it leaves behind, a slow, frightening SHUFFLING can be heard.

FADE TO BLACK.

CREDITS: "Badlands Cola" is written, directed, and produced by Renee Taylor Klint. This episode was sound designed and mixed by Russ More, and featured the voice talents of Briggon Snow, Liz Morey, Faye Holliday, Danielle Bryn, Elvis Barkdale II, Ron Guan, and Aryn Rozelle. Special thanks to our Artists' Representative, Giancarlo

Herrera. Visit badlandscola.com and follow BadlandsCola on Twitter for show notes, announcements, behind the scenes content, and more.

Good night.

END OF EPISODE. See <https://www.spectrepod.com/episodes/> for transcripts for today's guest show, *SPECTRE*.

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