

## **BADLANDS COLA - 111 - “THE MUD” PT. 1**

**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.

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

**MELINDA MOON:** Badlands Cola. Episode Eleven: The Mud.

*We begin right from the end of EPISODE 110, SUNNY and STRATHCONA sitting POOLSIDE, their words snatched at by the suddenly rising BREEZE.*

*They hover in rising horror over the parade of MESSAGES left by DR. GILLESPIE on SUNNY’s waterproof phone, each MESSAGE inspiring more helpless dread than the last.*

**DR. GILLESPIE:** *(On recorded message)* The wailing. The siren? It’s like a tornado warning out of the ninth circle of hell! But that’s not what’s scaring me.

You’re going to think I’ve lost my mind, but the fossil, the mandible; it was making the same sound. Not so ear-splittingly loud. But the same cadence, wrung-out and garbled, like music, but not for human ears. I tried to record, to get it on tape but...

What does it mean, Sunny? Why was it so important that I protected the fossil? Why was it echoing like —

**PHONE VOICEMAIL:** End of message. If you would like to save this message — Next message.

**SUNNY presses a *BUTTON* on the phone.**

**PHONE VOICEMAIL:** — Next message.

**DR. GILLESPIE:** *(On recorded message)* God DAMN it! You should buy more message storage space, this is impossible!

*(Steadying breath)* Maybe there's nothing more I can tell you to help. You know the mandible fossil is gone. I don't know where.

And...That's it. I don't know what to do next, here! My car battery is dead, and I sure as hell can't go back to that *bus*.

Wherever you are, investigator, I sincerely hope you still have a plan.

**PHONE VOICEMAIL:** End of messages. You have eight saved messages. Press one to return to main menu —

**SUNNY: Um.** That's it. That's all of them.  
*(When STRATHCONA doesn't reply)* Strath?

**STRATHCONA:** Go back. To the one with Hawthorne.

**SUNNY:** Gillespie said she's —

**STRATHCONA:** Just play it again. Please.

**SUNNY presses a *BUTTON* on the phone.**

**PHONE VOICEMAIL:** Message three.

**DR. GILLESPIE:** *(On recorded message)* The sound started pouring out of the radio. Once I realised the fossil had been stolen, I went to the radio station. I thought Strathcona had something to do with it all, for certain — but when I got there, it was only Hawthorne. Alone, passed out cold, ears bleeding like...like...I didn't know ears could bleed like that.

The sound...it was *so loud* there. I couldn't tell if she was bleeding from that, or from the blow to her head. Just barely managed to haul her out of there before the siren knocked me on my ass too. She's still very much unconscious, but breathing well. I'll —

**PHONE VOICEMAIL:** End of messages. You have eight saved messages. Press one to return to main menu —

**SUNNY:** There. See?

**STRATHCONA:** Someone *clubbed* her.

**SUNNY:** Hawthorne's a badass. Right? Whatever happened to her, she's safe with Gillespie.

**STRATHCONA:** *(Grim realisation)* Mel.

**SUNNY:** What?

**STRATHCONA:** Mel did it. She broke into the Raptor. *Again.*

**SUNNY:** You think she did it for her beacon?

**STRATHCONA:** To call Jasper home, maybe. And then call that Thing in after him.

*(Pause, thinking)* The walkie-talkies...

***STRATHCONA fumbles in his pocket for the walkie-talkie, which makes a weak but miraculous BLIP as he turns it on. Immediately, the line fuzzes to mild STATIC.***

**SUNNY:** It still works!

**STRATHCONA:** Wait, do you hear that?

***The STATIC carries strong for several seconds, the WHITE NOISE hitting a fever pitch, until slowly, a distant RINGING nudges through the wall of sound: the oppressive BEACON that Melinda unleashed on them in the desert. Rattled, STRATHCONA FLIPS through different frequencies, each one returning the same sound.***

**STRATHCONA:** It's on every channel. Every band. Jesus. She did it.

**SUNNY:** Is that it, then? The jawbone, the beacon, the broadcast. They have everything they need now. Strath, we lost.

***STRATHCONA hits the "transmit" button on the walkie-talkie.***

**STRATHCONA:** This is a message for Doctor Gillespie. If you have Hawthorne with you, then maybe you still have her walkie-talkie, which means maybe you can hear me. Please...hear me.

This is...

***Music: Synth trills, determined, almost mournful.***

**STRATHCONA:** Look, you know who I am. I know what you think of me, and I don't blame you, but please, just listen. I know that I'm the one that owes you, big time, but I need to ask you for one last favour.

Take Hawthorne and run. I don't care how, just get the hell out of the Badlands. I'm going to try to fix this.

I know you're wondering why you should listen to a thing I say. But I'm not going to screw it up this time, okay? I'm going to see it through to the end, no matter what. That's what I owe you.

*(Pause, as if wanting to say more and thinking better of it)* Strathcona out.

**SUNNY:** *(Quiet)* We're out of time, Strath. How can you fix this?

**STRATHCONA:** *(Determined)* I don't know. But I know where to start. Follow me.

***FOOTSTEPS dash out into the night, the music rising and taking on a grim rhythm.***

**SUNNY:** *(To the audience)* I do. Without hesitation. Strathcona and I sprint back to the front of the Sparville Hotel, the lightless town terrifyingly still despite the horrors it conceals between its walls.

The ponies are somehow still there, munching on sidewalk weeds. We mount up, and Strathcona takes off into the night like a shot from a gun. Bucky is once again quick to follow, and I hold on tight.

***SUNNY and STRATHCONA mount up and ride out, HOOVES clattering on the hardpacked desert. The music dissolves into skittering, dazzling synths. The wind rises.***

**SUNNY:** *(To the audience)* The desert winds are like raptors at our backs now, cutting through the sandstone labyrinth around us until the rock itself seems to chitter and howl. There are a dozen dust devils whipping up in me as we ride into the dark: hunger, exhaustion, terror. But more than anything, there's a devil in me that knows. It knows where Strath is leading us. It knows what awaits us, even if we've never seen the likes of it before, even if it's completely impossible.

The cold, empty scrap of Badlands where the Sparville Incident unfolded so many years ago. The air suddenly opens wide as a maw on either side of us, and we're surrounded by holes: the ones Jasper and his faithful victims dug, hollowing out the silty earth like a disease, until they found something that hollowed them out in return.

Just as we reach it, the skies open up, and a true desert deluge pours down on us.

***The STORM reaches its violent peak with a THUNDER CLAP, RAIN lashing down, the ponies stumbling in the churning MUD. As they approach, the sound of MEL'S BEACON becomes audible, then louder, tearing through the night like the point of a spear.***

**STRATHCONA:** *(Grumbling under his breath as he struggles to stay on course)*

**SUNNY:** *(Yelling)* Strath, the noise!

**STRATHCONA:** I know, stay close! The rain's made a swamp of it out here.

**SUNNY:** I'm right here, just hurry!

***SUNNY's pony SPOOKS, startled by something in its path.***

**SUNNY:** Oh, shit. Strath! Look!

**SUNNY:** *(To the audience)* The night is so dark, the echoing siren so disorienting, that my pony nearly stumbles into it headlong: a hole. A crater. Twice the size of the others, square at the corners, almost methodical in its excavation, and empty as space.

***The RINGING nudges up through the furious din of the beacon and the storm...***

**SUNNY:** *(To the audience)* It wasn't here when Strath and I first heard Mel's voice over the radiowaves, but we're far past the point where such violations of reality can hurt us.

What does hurt me, as I dismount to join Strathcona at the edge of the dig, mud squelching beneath our shoes and the beacon ringing in our skulls, is the understanding that clicks gently into place.

He's going in.

***The BEACON'S CRY is marginally quieter here, and SUNNY and STRATHCONA stand close to hear each other over its WAIL.***

**STRATHCONA:** You don't have to come.

**SUNNY:** Oh, hon't start...

**STRATHCONA:** Sunny, you don't—

**SUNNY:** *(Overlapping)* Shut up, will you? What did you do when I fell into the hotel? Huh?

**STRATHCONA:** Read you a breakfast menu so that you didn't think about dying?

**SUNNY:** And after that?

**SUNNY:** Headfirst, Strathcona. We live in the rabbit hole now, motherfucker. Let's go.

***SUNNY and STRATHCONA descend into the earth. The STORM fades into the EERILY QUIET hum of air moving through an underground tunnel, where the only sound is the ECHO of their footsteps. There is FRICTION in the pair's voices as they GRUNT and EDGE through the tricky underground path.***

**SUNNY:** *(To the audience)* We plunge into the darkness, into the earth, into the Mud. At least it's quieter down here.

**SUNNY:** It's so deep. It's so deep. How is it this deep?

**STRATHCONA:** *(Tense)* Pretty sure it's not. This has fucked-up Moon reality written all over it. Tell me if you see anything.

**SUNNY:** Yeah, let me see, uh... Just rocks. And mud. And your backside. Do you have a plan yet?

**STRATHCONA:** Yes, but I don't think you'll like it. It goes: find Mel, get Mel out of here, hope she has the power to stop whatever



eldritch steam train Jasper's put in motion, avoid death and insanity throughout.

**SUNNY:** *(Under breath)* Yeah, that's...that's not a strong plan.

**STRATHCONA:** Yeah, well, you're the one who insisted on following me.

**SUNNY:** And even if Mel has the power to stop this...she needs the will, too.

**STRATHCONA:** Yeah, that's the scary part.

...I think it should be you. Who talks to her.

**SUNNY:** What? No. You need to be the one to...to...

What the fuck is that?

**STRATHCONA:** What the fuck is *what*?

*(Looking to where SUNNY points)* It's an ammonite. Pretty common fossil.

**SUNNY:** *(Extremely unconvinced)* Are you sure?

**STRATHCONA:** Yeah. Look, there's a cluster of them up here.

**SUNNY:** *(Sarcastic)* Oh, "cluster," that makes it so much better!

***Their FOOTSTEPS continue through the caves, until... Almost subsonically, a distant RINGING begins.***

**SUNNY:** *(Whispering)* Do you hear that?

**STRATHCONA:** *(Whispering)* Yeah, screw that. Let's move.

**SUNNY:** *(Whispering)* Yeah...

**SUNNY** and **STRATHCONA** both **BREATHE** heavy as they push through the tunnel. Their shoulders and hips have begun to **SCRAPE** on the walls as the space narrows, clothes nearly tearing. **STRATHCONA** becomes slightly more distant as he forges ahead.

**SUNNY:** Can you go any faster?

**STRATHCONA:** I'm trying, it's pretty narrow up here. *(Grunt of effort as some clothing definitely tears)* Really narrow.

**SUNNY:** *(Distracted)* Strath? Do you see all these...these, um. Ammonites?

**STRATHCONA:** *(Not paying attention)* Shit. The tunnel's thinning away to nothing here. I'd have to really jam myself to make it through.

**SUNNY:** Huh? No, how can this be right? Did we take a wrong turn?

**STRATHCONA:** *(Bitter)* Maybe. Maybe we shouldn't have come here at all. Maybe Jasper and Mel are tearing up town and we're down here running around like a couple of —

**SUNNY:** Hey, *stop*. This is still our best lead. Let's just turn around and get our bearings again, okay?

**STRATHCONA:** Okay. Lead on.

**SUNNY:** Okay.

*The pair TRUDGE backwards through the noticeably more difficult terrain.*

**SUNNY:** *(Breathing heavy)* Stop. Stop right now.

**STRATHCONA:** Why?

**SUNNY:** Is this the way we came?

*The RINGING returns...louder.*

**STRATHCONA:** ...What?

**SUNNY:** Are we *sure* sure this is the way we just came?

**STRATHCONA:** We literally just walked down this part of the tunnel.

**SUNNY:** Oh, don't say that.

**STRATHCONA:** *(Dread rising)* Why?

**SUNNY:** Because the tunnel is narrower here now. *(Whispering)* And there are way more ammonites.

**STRATHCONA comes up behind SUNNY.**

**STRATHCONA:** *(Reassessing, staying calm)* Sunny, step back. Straight back, okay?

**SUNNY** *steps back; they marvel at the impossibly tighter corridor of stone.*

**STRATHCONA:** It's happening again. Shit.

**SUNNY:** What are the ammonites doing here? Are they...moving?

**STRATHCONA:** I really don't think the ammonites are a priority right now.

**SUNNY:** Wait, does this section of the tunnel look better or worse than what you saw up ahead?

**STRATHCONA:** Worse. Way worse.

**SUNNY:** Then we go back and try to squeeze through there. Before it gets too...um...

**STRATHCONA:** Easier said than done.

**They TRUDGE back to the original narrow section of the tunnel, shoulders now SCRAPING on the stone as they move.**

**STRATHCONA:** Look at this. It's too narrow to walk, we're going to have to go in at an angle.

**SUNNY:** You first.

**STRATHCONA:** *Fuck off.*

**SUNNY:** I don't have room to get around you! Quick, I don't want to find out how small this place gets.

**STRATHCONA:** Oh, Jesus. Okay. Hold on.

**STRATHCONA** *lines up with the thin opening in the rock and SLOWLY SQUEEZES his bulk through. His voice MUFFLES the further he goes.*

**STRATHCONA:** *(Grunting, pushing self through narrow opening)*

**SUNNY:** Um. Is it okay?

**STRATHCONA:** *No, it's a nightmare.* But it looks like the passage opens back up after the bottleneck — *(Startled)* oh, shit!

**SUNNY:** *(Startled twice as hard)* What?

**For a long moment...nothing.**

**STRATHCONA:** I'm fine.

**SUNNY:** Jesus...

**STRATHCONA:** It opens back up. I can make it. Barely.

**The RINGING swells, paired with a strange sound, like stone GRINDING on stone. Nearer, dirt clods FALL from the low ceiling.**

**SUNNY:** *(To self)* Oh god, oh please no.  
Strath?

**STRATHCONA:** *(Muffled, further away)* What?

**SUNNY:** Get a move on!

**STRATHCONA:** Ouch ouch ouch. (*Intense grunts of effort until he's finally though*)

**SUNNY:** You okay?

**STRATHCONA:** Scraped the hell out of my shoulder, but I'm through. Your turn! Just...try not to look at the walls.

**SUNNY:** What?! Why?!

**STRATHCONA:** Because it'll freak you out. Come on!

**SUNNY:** (*To SELF*) I hate the Badlands.

**Music:** *thin, ominous synths filtering in. SUNNY positions themself at the tall crack in the stone.*

**SUNNY:** Okay. (*Gentle grunting*)

It's super narrow, how the hell did *you* get through? (*Struggling*)

Strath, I'm stuck —

**STRATHCONA:** You're not stuck. You've got plenty of room.

**SUNNY:** (*Out of breath*) Oh bullshit, quit lying to me.

**STRATHCONA:** Then stop giving me a reason to. Come on, just breathe out and push through.

**SUNNY:** (*Struggling even harder, breathing heavy.*)

**SUNNY's shirt RIPS.**

**SUNNY:** Ow, ow, ow, ow! Strathcona, seriously, I can't. I'm stuck. I'm stuck. I'm fucking stuck.

**STRATHCONA:** Breathe. Tuck your ribs in, it'll give you more room.

**SUNNY:** (*Losing composure*) You don't understand. I can't. I can't. I'm not — It's —

**STRATHCONA:** Yes, yes, you can! Trust me, you can.

**SUNNY:** Agh, SHIT!

**STRATHCONA:** What?

**SUNNY:** It's closing in! It's getting tighter! Oh god, oh god...

**STRATHCONA:** Shit. It's okay. We're going to get you out of this, just keep wiggling.

**SUNNY:** I *can't*...I can't breathe...I can't —

**SUNNY:** (*To the audience*) I can feel it. The rock, folding over me. Into me. Skin compressing against cartilage flexing over bone, a billion years of ancient stone contorting my skeleton to its will.

***A terrible, skin-crawling, chitinous DIN...***

**SUNNY:** (*To the audience*) I open my eyes, look at the wall that is killing me, and realise: not stone. *Ammonites*.

Thousands of them, their infinite spirals teeming with hideous iridescence as they glint, and grind, and move; unspooling just

millimeters from my eye, angling upwards to reveal their insides, their wet, reaching stems, their—

**SUNNY:** *(A muffled yelp of pure terror)*

**STRATHCONA:** Shit, I told you not to look!

**SUNNY:** *(Breathing shakily, interrupted by stifled fearful whimpering, then)* Pull me out!

**STRATHCONA:** *(Incredulous)* You'll leave half your skin behind!

**SUNNY:** You have to! Okay? Grab my arms and pull!

*(When STRATHCONA hesitates) Do it!*

**STRATHCONA:** Jesus. Sunny, I'm sorry.

**SUNNY:** NOW.

**STRATHCONA:** *(Grunting, pulling SUNNY through the opening)*

**SUNNY:** *(Agonised cries rising to a stabbing SCREAM as STRATHCONA pulls them free, indeed leaving a good deal of their skin behind.)*

***The vile chittering of the ammonites cuts; the MUSIC and RINGING crescendos. SUNNY and STRATHCONA seem to FALL, as if the ground itself gave way, and land with heavy THUDS.***

***The walls and the RINGING both seem to fall away with a supernatural RUSH, the air suddenly open to what feels like summer night.***



**SUNNY:** *(Keening, in pain from their shredded back and the impossible fall)*

**STRATHCONA:** *(In pain from the fall, coughing)*

**SUNNY:** What the fuck! What the fuck!

**STRATHCONA:** It's okay, you're through. I got you.

**SUNNY:** My back...

**STRATHCONA:** *(Pause)* It's not pretty. Cuts aren't deep, but you're bleeding. I'm going to put my flannel around your back, okay? It'll sting.

**The flutter of CLOTH.**

**SUNNY:** *(Hissing in pain)*

**STRATHCONA:** There, keep it wrapped tight. Like that.

**For a breath, the only sound is that of the CICADA SONG.**

**SUNNY:** Where are we?

**STRATHCONA:** Woah, woah, take it easy, just sit a moment.

**SUNNY:** No, where are we? We're *outside*. The storm is gone. Is this another echo? Like the hotel?

**STRATHCONA:** It's still night, maybe we just pushed through an opening?

**SUNNY:** And what? Fell up through the earth? Strath, look: we're on top of a mesa. This isn't right.

*Distant sounds, like a JOYOUS VOICE confusingly ECHOED off stone, reach them. They FREEZE, straining to hear.*

**STRATHCONA:** Wait, do you hear that?

**SUNNY:** Voices?

*The pair MOVES quietly across the mesa, until they come to the edge.*

**SUNNY:** *(To the audience)* Slowly, we make our way across the damp plateau of the mesa, crouched painfully low, as if we're still trapped in the tunnels, the stone closing on us like a throat. The rain has stopped; the night air is cool and open on all sides, and somehow so much worse than underground. The night sky feels like a solid mass, pressing down, threatening to seep into our eyes and choke us like animals in a tar pit.

The stars are a billion light-years away; the stars are hovering inches from my face.

**STRATHCONA:** Sunny, look...

**SUNNY:** *(To the audience)* Strath touches my shoulder, gentle, and brings my attention back to earth.

I look over the anxiously sloping edge of the mesa, and see a gathering in the Badlands. Far below us, at least a dozen people stand together, rapt in attention. There are holes everywhere, inky wounds in the rain-soaked soil, tinged black with coal sediment, so

deep and dark that even the network of glaring worklamps can't reveal the bottoms. The lamps are a mess of knotted cables and connectors, all of them routing back to a single white van that rests uneasily in the knife-sharp shadows.

***Gradually, the air opens up to the sounds from below, and the words of the now-familiar manifesto become clearer...***

It's the digsite. The very one that Strathcona and I entered, but different. Cleaner, somehow, and not just because of the recent rains. *Freshly delved.*

Standing near the biggest and deepest hole, casting a dozen eldritch shadows with his arms thrown wide and a video camera in hand, is...

**SUNNY:** Jasper. It's Jasper.

***Music: anxious plucked guitar strings.***

***Episode 11 "The Mud" will continue in Part 2. Stay tuned...***

**END OF EPISODE**

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