

BADLANDS COLA - 109 - “SPARVILLE”

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.

SCENE 109.1

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

SUNNY: Badlands Cola. Episode Nine: Sparville.

FADE IN.

INT. RAPTORBUS - MORNING - D6

Picking up immediately from the end of EPISODE 108, the bus is simultaneously uncomfortable and EMPTY, STRATHCONA's rage still ringing in the QUIET.

HAWTHORNE: *(Whistles)*

SUNNY: *(Under breath)* Shit. Shit.

HAWTHORNE: And here I'd have put money down on you two being attached at the hip by now. I mean, what happened?

SUNNY: He — ! I...

...I might have made a small mistake which has completely destroyed any and all trust he had in me.

HAWTHORNE: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, okay. Well then. There is only one way to fix that.

SUNNY: (*Dejected, bitter*) There's nothing to fix. You heard him, the last thing he wants is me chasing after him now.

HAWTHORNE: Well, maybe you don't have the slightest idea what Strathcona wants.

SUNNY: (*Frustrated*) Pfft. You're right. Not a clue.

HAWTHORNE: And I can't be of much help there. But I do know this: he's spent more time with you in the last week than anyone in this town since...uh...well...

SUNNY: Since Mel? Yes, he told me.

HAWTHORNE: Well *did* he? Even more proof, then.

SUNNY: Proof of what?

HAWTHORNE: That you should go after him.

SUNNY: That's...no. He's not going to...

HAWTHORNE: Listen, if Jasper Moon's in Sparville, then Strath might as well be serving himself up on a silver platter. And you double that if Melinda beats him there.

It is easy to lose yourself out there, Sunny. You know what I mean. You need someone watching your back.

SUNNY: How would I even follow him? If his hunch is right, then my truck is probably dead too.

HAWTHORNE: Well...

HAWTHORNE walks to the DOOR of the bus and OPENS it, revealing the one remaining PONY.

HAWTHORNE: Ever ridden a pony before?

SUNNY: Oh, no. Hard pass.

HAWTHORNE: Sorry darling, I suppose you don't exactly give off the equestrian vibe, but Bucky only nips if you let him!

SUNNY: Bucky? This horse is named *Bucky*?

HAWTHORNE: I promise, he is a sweet boy. Here, I'll show you how to mount up. You're just gonna put your foot in that stirrup right there and...

SUNNY: No. No. Hey, let go!

No. No, this is ridiculous. I am not about to get on a fucking horse to go galavanting across the desert on the slim hope of finding some asshole chasing down a rogue radio signal. I'm not doing this, I'm DONE.

Bucky SHIFTS nervously as SUNNY throws the reins and STOMPS off into the desert, WIND picking up sandy soil in their wake.

HAWTHORNE: Sunny! Where are you going?

SUNNY: Somewhere. Anywhere. Away.

FADE TO BLACK.

SCENE 109.2

FROM BLACK.

EXT. BADLANDS - MORNING - D6

Music: Unsteady, warbling guitar.

The QUIET of the Badlands might have been oddly comforting to SUNNY the night before, but now its eerie SILENCE seems to gather all around them, the WIND and the INSECT SONG stalking them as they flee their problems.

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* I'm doing the stupidest possible thing: running out into the Badlands mad as hell. But course correction would require thought, and *I'm not doing that anymore.*

My march holds out longer than I thought it would. But eventually, I can't ignore the prickle of sunburn on my shoulders, the twist of thirst and hunger in my sandpaper throat. Just as I concede that my stupid plan-that-isn't-a-plan has met its match, I see something odd. A stegosaurus.

Music fades.

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* The silhouette is unmistakable, each back plate thrust up into the blue of the sky, lining the hunched spine that ends in a spiked tail. This is the exact same life-sized replica that hovers over the entrance to the once-proud paleontology centre.

I step without thinking, and immediately trip over something: a curb. Even though I didn't mean to, even though it's not possible, I've walked myself right up to the parking lot of the paleontology centre.

Music: *Low, thrumming bass.*

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* Strathcona was right. It is getting worse.

If my mind was swimming before, this break in reality sends it sinking to the bottom. Half-dazed, I walk past the motionless stegosaurus, to a familiar old bench along the edge of the cliff, and I sit.

The WIND picks up closer to the cliff, cold and keening.

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* This is where I ran to, on that first night in the Badlands. Maybe this is all just one big loop after all.

The moment I sit down, the thinking starts right back up. All my rocky hollows are flash-flooded with the questions I've only just been able to stave off. Why does everything seem to revolve around Sparville? Where is the jawbone? *What* is the jawbone? Is Jasper Moon coming?

And below all that, the one thing bubbling away, the thing I refuse to look at directly because I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about it. Strathcona.

The music takes a mournful turn.

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* How badly did I screw that up?

A few hours ago, we were taking turns confessing our most fucked-up secrets, and...

When we barged through the door of his bus, there was a moment where I tripped. And he caught me. Mumbled some smartass comment about me being a klutz, but his arms stayed wrapped tight.

Strathcona insisted I wasn't a monster, and the idea that I might have proved him wrong sits in my stomach, heavy as a brick and twice as sharp around the edges.

The music dissolves on the cliffside wind.

SUNNY: Fuck. Fuck! FUCK!

DR. GILLESPIE: Rough day?

SUNNY: *(Startled)* Agh!

DR. GILLESPIE: You expect to come out here and act like *this*, and no one to come and check on you?

SUNNY: Doctor Gillespie. Where the hell did you come from?

DR. GILLESPIE: I spotted you from the lab window while I was taking a coffee break. Are you...feeling okay? You look a little sunburnt.

SUNNY: No, Doctor, I am not okay. And apparently, everytime that happens, I find myself out here.

DR. GILLESPIE: Well, it always was a nice spot to come and mull things over. How goes the investigation?

SUNNY: (*Bitterly sarcastic*) The "investigation" is actually coming together nicely. Really popping off. You know, this would normally be the fun part.

DR. GILLESPIE: But now you're sitting on a bench shaped like a dinosaur screaming obscenities off of a cliff?

A pause.

SUNNY: Something good happened to me. Like really...I mean nothing spectacular — just honest. Real. And it's the first time I've felt that adrenaline rush outside of work in...God, I don't even want to think how long. And then, wouldn't you know! It was torn up into little tiny pieces.

Another pause.

DR. GILLESPIE: Yikes. Listen, this sounds personal, and I don't really do personal but...Sounds like a problem—

SUNNY: It was just a stupid misunderstanding! I...I just want to go back to how it was before.

DR. GILLESPIE: You know that's not how it works. We can't rewind our lives. No matter how much we wish we could.

SUNNY: (*Realisation dawning*) Doctor Levesque.

Music: *The warbling synth returns, high and pained. DR. GILLESPIE sits down next to SUNNY.*

DR. GILLESPIE: You know, one of the last times I saw him, we had a fight. The last night at the centre; we'd been slammed with tourists all day and were behind on our curation work on a downright biblical batch of ammonites, stressed and exhausted as usual.

I started it. Asked him why he was wasting all his time on Jasper Moon's bizarre pet project, scolded him for giving the time of day to a man like that, even if there was some genuine scientific benefit to be dug up. Even told him he was dragging down the centre's reputation by associating with the whole disaster. And we was silent the entire time. When my rant was over, he just left. *That* was the moment.

SUNNY: What moment?

DR. GILLESPIE: The moment I should have stopped cursing his curiosity and his naivete and his goddamned stubbornness, and just gone after him.

The music echoes away.

DR. GILLESPIE: See how miserable this exercise is? Don't get caught up in trying to rewind back to a moment in time, investigator. It's not worth the heartache. Trust me.

SUNNY: I...I'm sorry, Doctor. When I came by to speak to you that first time...I...I was shitty to you.

DR. GILLESPIE: Interesting.

For a moment, no one speaks.

DR. GILLESPIE: Oh no, please continue!

SUNNY: I mean. If I would have spent more than two seconds thinking about it, I'd have realised how upsetting the news of the Moon case was for you. And how you probably shut down the centre just to get some distance from the whole thing, and everything that happened to Levesque —

DR. GILLESPIE: *(Overlapping, confused)* Sunny, you appear to be trying to extend some sort of olive branch, and I appreciate that. But that's not why I closed down the centre.

SUNNY: It isn't?

DR. GILLESPIE: Eugh, God, no. Levesque would be spinning in his grave if I shut us down for the sake of sentiment. I closed our doors because I got my hands on one of the most absurd specimens I've ever seen, and I wanted the time to properly research it.

SUNNY: Wait, absurd specimen? From where?

DR. GILLESPIE: Oh, one of those illegal amateur teams that pops up every few years. Caught them out digging in the middle of the Badlands outside Sparville. Confiscated their findings on the spot. They gave it up easily enough, but...far as I can tell, the specimen isn't like anything in the fossil record.

SUNNY: Can you describe it?

DR. GILLESPIE: *(Excited)* "Can I describe—?" Oh! Well! Just give me a minute, where to start! Um, the bizarre mineralisation, the

specimen integrity on a level I haven't seen since my early days, and not to mention the honeycombing in the frontal dentary is positively *unhinged* —

Music: *A single plucked guitar, scattered and curious.*

SUNNY: Wait, um. "Dentary...?" Doctor, is it a jawbone?

DR. GILLESPIE: Well, see, the correct term is actually "mandible" —

SUNNY: Oh my god. Do you still have it?

DR. GILLESPIE: Of course I still have it! I was just trying to do some dating on it this morning. *(Suddenly suspicious)* Why do you ask?

SUNNY: Only because that fossil might just be the keystone of my entire investigation. Maybe even the entire Moon cult.

DR. GILLESPIE: You think a fossil has something to do with the...
Oh no, you're going to want to see it up close, aren't you?

SUNNY: Oh, yes, please! If I could just...

Wait. No.

DR. GILLESPIE: ...No?

SUNNY: Doctor, listen to me. Everything is riding on that jawbone staying out of the cult's hands; you have to keep it safe. Here, take my number.

You go back into the centre, lock all the doors — I mean actually really lock them — and wait for us to come back so we can plan our next move.

DR. GILLESPIE: Us?

SUNNY: Yes. I have something I need to do first. I'll be back.

SUNNY sprints out into the Badlands, the music echoing in their wake...

FADE TO BLACK.

SCENE 109.3

FADE IN.

EXT. RAPTORBUS - MORNING - D6

RUNNING as fast as they can, SUNNY hurtles back to the Raptorbus with renewed determination. As they approach, strange RADIO SOUNDS are emanating from the bus: Hawthorne's efforts in combating the mysterious signal from Sparville. The door to the bus BLANGS open as HAWTHORNE emerges to greet a gassed SUNNY.

HAWTHORNE: Oh! Sunny! You're back!

SUNNY: *(Out of breath)* Get me on this horse.

HAWTHORNE: What?

SUNNY: This horse. Pony. Put me on it. Please.

HAWTHORNE: Oh well only because you said it so polite.

(To pony) Come on, Bucky, steady boy.

SUNNY: *(Nervous laughter)*

HAWTHORNE: *(To SUNNY)* You're gonna be fine, you just need to calm down. All right, put your foot in the stirrup here, no, your other foot, and we're going up in three. One, two, three!

SUNNY and HAWTHORNE: *(Both grunt)*

SUNNY: Ha! Okay! Okay, okay, okay. Nice Bucky. Okay, yeah!

HAWTHORNE: Well, I must admit, you have pretty good saddle posture for a city slicker.

BUCKY snorts amicably as HAWTHORNE comes up alongside SUNNY.

HAWTHORNE: It's good to see you came to your senses, kiddo.

SUNNY: Oh, there is still *plenty* of time for me to fuck this up.

(Sincere) But, um. Thank you, Hawthorne. Really. You'll be okay here until we get back?

HAWTHORNE: Hey, don't you worry one bit about me! This retired park warden isn't about to give up the Badlands without a fight.

Music: Quiet guitar strums, shimmering and hopeful as they rise.

HAWTHORNE: Just try to remember: a big city investigator ain't gonna do Strathcona any good out there. But a friend? That, he can use.

SUNNY: I know. I'll try.

I'll also try not to start a wildfire or trample any endangered marmots, or anything. You know. Warden's honour and all that.

HAWTHORNE: Oh, honey. I appreciate that, but park wardens protect the natural world. And whatever Jasper brought to the Badlands, it sure as hell doesn't belong here. So if you get the chance? I want you to put your boot firmly up its ass!

SUNNY: Yes, ma'am. *(Pause)* Um, Hawthorne?

HAWTHORNE: Yep?

SUNNY: What direction is Sparville again?

HAWTHORNE: Oh, you don't have to worry about direction one bit! Bucky and Triton, they are inseparable, so he'll just take off like a shot after her scent the moment I let go. Which is coming.

SUNNY: Wait, wait, what do you mean by— Hawthorne, wait, wait! No no no no — AGH!!

The music SOARS as SUNNY's pony takes off, HOOFBEATS charging out across the desert.

HAWTHORNE: *(Distant)* Good luck, darling! Go get our boy!

FADE TO BLACK.

SCENE 109.4**FROM BLACK.****EXT. BADLANDS / EXT. SPARVILLE / INT. SPARVILLE HOTEL -
MORNING - D6**

SUNNY's pony has calmed, but still RACES through the mesas, SUNNY bumping along in the saddle.

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* As Bucky twists and turns through the maze of coppery rock and silt, I do my best to stay in the saddle, and keep anxious watch out for Badlands tricks: a sudden drop off the side of a cliff, an unexpected hole in the earth...or an overturned van. Sweat trickles down my back and between my clavicles. I see nothing. For what feels like hours, I see nothing.

And then: something. The suggestion of a skyline with too many right angles to be hoodoos. A faded sign that juts suddenly from the desert beats me to the punchline: *Welcome to Sparville.*

BUCKY's hoofbeats tap along as SUNNY slows.

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* It's a one-street village nestled in a narrow valley between the mesas, as only a mining town would be: a bank, a one-screen movie theatre, a cafe, all frozen in time judging by their atomic-era signage, the neons and pastels sun-bleached and worn to smoothness.

I scan the vista of downtown Sparville for any trace of Strathcona or his pony, but everything is still.

We ride through the shadow of the town's welcome sign, and I see there are several smaller arrow-shaped signs nearby: one pointing to the main road back to the highway, one to the coal mine that was shut down so long ago, and one to...the hotel.

The town is still, but a strange WIND picks up, catching on the edges of ragged buildings and eking out an unnerving HOWL. An inexplicable TENSION begins to RISE, the fear of being alone in a place that has not yet revealed its threat...

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* The lettering has been scrubbed at by decades of sand, and looks exactly how I feel. Insubstantial.

For a moment, the buildings around me seem to warp at the edges of my vision, and I can feel every empty room and shadowed corner pulsing, begging me to get lost in their twisting, looping, reality-breaking bullshit.

It's like I'm back in the Moon House, alone, and standing on the brink of something impossible to understand.

The tension BREAKS. A pony gives a far-off WHINNY.

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* And then I see another horse. By the hotel.

And then *Bucky* sees the other horse by the hotel.

In the dusty distance, the second pony continues to NEIGH happily. SUNNY's pony WHINNIES in reply and TAKES OFF like a shot.

SUNNY: Agh! Easy, boy.

The distant SOUNDS of the second PONY become NEAR.

SUNNY: *(Dismounting)* Okay. Uh. Bucky, you...you stay out here. Maybe some of Triton's chill will rub off on you.

Now, where is your rider?

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* The hotel loomed so large from further down the street, but up close, it's almost like a theme park attraction: the intricate greek columns that line its entrance look fake somehow, like plaster, and the regal facade hides much simpler architecture behind it.

I push on the brass and glass rotating doors, and realise it's just your average highway-adjacent chain hotel on the inside.

SUNNY pushes through ROTATING DOORS, the mechanisms GRINDING after years of misuse. Inside, the energy of the hotel is HEAVY. Every step ECHOES for what seems like an unnaturally long time.

Music: Blunt, fuzzy guitar strings that ladder anxiously up and down.

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* Faux-marble counters, satin chairs, the whole tawdry nine yards. Even a red carpet. Well, used to be red.

SUNNY: *(Sniffing)* Ugh. It must have gone moldy ages ago.

SUNNY's voice ECHOES off into the halls, with no reply to break the QUIET that follows.

SUNNY: Okay, let's do this. Phone light, on.

Their FOOTSTEPS are careful, slow on the sodden carpet. The music fades away, like the light.

SUNNY: Strathcona? Strathcona! It's me. *(Quieter, to self)* You can't hate me that much, can you? Maybe you can...

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* I flip a coin in my head and take the left hallway that peels off from the lobby, grateful to leave the creeping mildew stench behind. I pass a janitorial closet, an elevator shaft, a breakfast bar with its narrow windows papered up. The lights are all out, and the windows are too small to let much of the blazing summer light in.

Quickly, I find myself walking alone into the dark, dust motes drifting through the tiny pool of light from my phone. Occasionally, I let the light bounce up along the walls, their retro sconces and picture frames throwing shadows that make my heart jump every time.

SUNNY: *(Quieter, nervous, intermittently whistling or humming "Tempted" by the Hazelnuts)* Strathcona? Strathcona!

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* The air in here is dry and unmoving, but somehow it's cold, an invasive chill pressing up against my bare arms. I realise I almost don't want to call out.

My light spills over the walls, illuminating a long, silent tableau of picture frames and closed doors with elaborate glass windows and rusted nameplates. There's an oil painting of the hotel on its opening day, 1898, then a door labeled LAUNDRY. An action shot of a local rodeo next to HEAD OFFICE.

SUNNY: *(Gasp)* No way. No fucking way.

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* There's a copper plate below the photograph, and the name engraved on it sends my stomach into my shoes. Joseph and Carmen Moon, Founders and Proprietors.

The hotel I'm currently standing in was built by Jasper and Melinda's ancestors. Hawthorne had it half-right: the Moons weren't just a wealthy Sparville family. They were *the* wealthy Sparville family.

Still reeling from the discovery, I turn the faint circle of light down the dead hallway, illuminating another impressively framed photograph. Joseph Moon again, standing in front of a gaping hole in the earth.

No. The Sparville Incident is rotting my brain. Not a gaping hole: a coal mine, early in its life. Behind the Moon patriarch, men in flat caps and charcoal smears carve into the ground, install timbers to support the opening, and peer suspiciously at the camera. At the apex of the timbers, a single crudely etched sign announces the mine's ownership: Sparville Mine, Property of the MMC.

(Realising) You bastards. Of course. The Sparville hotel wasn't the Moons' only venture. They owned the mining outfit that fueled Sparville from tip to tail! Hawthorne said the coal industry went bust, and still, the Moon family kept the mines going for years after. They must have funded new explorations, tunneling and mapping out the endless stony darkness below the Badlands, in search of ore that did not exist. Until the mid-century rolled around and the last kids had to pack it all up.

Why would you bankroll a failed mining project for that long?

Music: Anxious synth.

SUNNY: *(To the Audience)* Then I realise: they weren't looking for ore. They were digging for something else. This family's been digging through the Badlands, searching for the bones, for over a century.

Just then, the WALKIE-TALKIE, left forgotten in SUNNY's backpack, POPS to startling life with an incoming caller. The music cuts.

SUNNY: Agh! Fucking...

The walkie-talkie FRITZES: it's a bad connection, but there seems to be a shred of human SPEECH below the static?

STRATHCONA: *(Over the walkie-talkie)* Hawthorne, come in.

Hawthorne, can you hear me? This is Strathcona. There's nothing in Sparville. Just dust and weeds and the Moons' old hotel rotting on its foundations. No Jasper. No Mel.

SUNNY presses the TALK button on the device.

SUNNY: *(Speaking into walkie-talkie)* Strathcona?

STRATHCONA: ...Sunny?

SUNNY: Surprise.

STRATHCONA: *(Icy)* Why are you taking up this frequency? I told you, I don't want your help.

SUNNY: Yeah, well, I followed you anyways.

STRATHCONA: You...what? Do not tell me you're in Sparville.

SUNNY: Oh, I'm in the *hotel*. Strathcona, listen —

STRATHCONA: For fuck's sake, Sunny...

SUNNY: No, listen to me! Strathcona, I found the *jawbone*. The last piece of the Moons' puzzle.

STRATHCONA: What? Where?

SUNNY begins to walk back to the LOBBY.

SUNNY: At the paleontology centre. I can't believe I didn't think of it before, but Doctor Gillespie confirmed it.

STRATHCONA: Jesus, if Jasper or Mel find out —

SUNNY: I know. The doctor's keeping it safe as he can, but we need to get back to the centre and come up with a plan to keep it out of the cult's hands.

STRATHCONA: Why aren't you at the centre now? Why did you waste all this time coming out here?

SUNNY: Because...

Let's just get back to town, okay?

STRATHCONA: Fine. Where the hell in this nightmare hotel are you, anyways?

SUNNY: I'm in the lobby. Where are you?

SILENCE stretches. TENSION RISES.

SUNNY: Strathcona?

STRATHCONA: Where did you say you are?

SUNNY: The lobby?

STRATHCONA: Sunny...I'm in the lobby.

SUNNY: What? No, you're not.

SUNNY walks for a while, then SLOWS, their footsteps confused, then SPEEDS UP in a different direction before SLOWING again. Though they cannot hear it, the RINGING has returned.

STRATHCONA: Sunny...

The RINGING pitches up, swallowing all other sounds.

SUNNY: If you were, I'd see you, and I'm looking everywhere. This is definitely...it's...

(Pause, horrified) Strathcona. The lobby doors. They're...they're gone.

STATIC.

FADE TO BLACK.

Music: "TEMPTED" by THE HAZELNUTS.

RADIO STATIC.

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 Liz Morey, Danielle Bryn, Elvis Barkdale II, and Briggon Snow. 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

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