

BADLANDS COLA - 101 - “NO VACANCY”

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SCENE 101.1

A dead sound from an era of forgotten tech; the WHIR of a VHS tape.

JASPER MOON: I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: what is this all about? What is it about, Jasper Moon? Well, you have been patient, haven't you? Years and years, toiling in the mud, just like me. Perhaps you've proven you're ready, and so perhaps I'll tell you what it's about: it's about faith. Not in what's above. No. Faith in what's below. What's under your own two feet, right there. Right here. What's older than the pyramids? Calcified, fossilized, petrified. Not me, that's for sure. I'm just a shovel.

Are you a shovel, too? If you are, *you've got to dig*. There's something in the mud.

The irony isn't lost on me. That the world has chosen to descend upon us just as our work was coming to fruition. Just as the truth was showing, a glint beneath the dry, hot, cracking surface. That's just how these things play out, isn't it? (*Giggle.*) I'm not surprised, and I'm not unprepared.

To my sister: I'm sorry, but it falls to you, now. I have been the shovel that unearths the waiting remains of our ending; now you must be

the beacon that calls them from their sleep. You have your instructions, baby. I'll be listening.

The recording device is FUMBLED, the terrible voice in the tape CLICKING into SILENCE.

EXT. HIGHWAYSIDE ROADSTOP - AFTERNOON - D1

A roadside truck stop: the summer sun hammers down on the blank gold of the surrounding flatlands. The farms disappeared several kilometres back. TRUCKS and CARS pass, kicking up dust and exhaust as they go. Distant CONVERSATIONS can be heard, tourists and motorists sweating in the nearby gas station.

Resting easy on their truck at the centre of it all is SUNNY. They speak to DETECTIVE NICHOLSON on the phone.

SUNNY: Ha. Oh, that's priceless.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: *(Over the phone)* I'm going to pretend you're a lot more disturbed by that recording than you sound. We're still deciding whether or not to let the press have it.

SUNNY: Good luck keeping it away from them, Detective. Your people found that on him at the arrest?

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Not on him. Stashed in the back rooms behind the laundromat. On a tape.

SUNNY: As in, like, VHS? Wait wait wait, "back rooms...?"

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Sunny, they had a whole rats' nest back there. We're still scraping the place down. It's grim.

SUNNY: Let me guess: more fossils.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: That's what we expected. Your reports said Jasper Moon's collection was his pride and joy, but the place was empty. Not a tibia in sight.

SUNNY: Oh. Well, it's not unusual for a cult to torch all their belongings if they think a bust is coming.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Maybe. There's a big empty lot behind the strip mall, looks like someone's been rooting around in there; I'll let you know how that search goes. Until then, that bone collection is MIA.

SUNNY: Good thing you're not paying me to track down a mysteriously missing ossuary. Let's talk about what you *are* paying me for. You gonna tell me why you're playing me highly confidential cultist manifestos, then sending me out into the heart of badlands country? On a Saturday?

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: You're already en route?

SUNNY: Heh. Just about to pass Sparville.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Sunny...

SUNNY: What? Your email said "ASAP," so I packed up my kit and headed out first thing. I might be a *private* investigator, but I take my job seriously.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: I didn't think you'd leave before I had a chance to brief you. You're not driving right now, are you?

SUNNY: No, officer, I'm not. Pulled over at a rest stop the moment I saw *another* email with the subject line "URGENT: BONE CULT MANIFESTO." So, why am I back on the Moon case? You got your guy, who exactly am I supposed to be tracking down?

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: It's the bit at the end. About the...sister.

SUNNY: Nicholson, Jasper Moon doesn't have a sister. I know that, you know that. I tailed that zealot for *months*; if he had a sibling, even one outside the cult, I'd have found them.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Your initial investigation didn't cover his hometown.

SUNNY: *You* explicitly directed me to keep my investigation to your city limits.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Look, I believe you, okay? We've got nothing about a sibling on our end either. But we've always been foggy on this guy's motives, and now we have a loose end, and the department hates loose ends —

SUNNY: (*Overlapping*) Hates loose ends, yeah. You know, if you're a PI, you just work 'til the clock runs out and cash the cheque.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Just when I convinced myself you people weren't completely morally bankrupt.

SUNNY: Sounds like a "you" problem.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Listen, chances are this is nothing: no sister, no passing of the torch, just a master manipulator making up stories at the end of his rope.

SUNNY: So you're sending me to tidy up the loose ends in the depressing desert town where our sweet little cult boy grew up into a big scary cult man. To save costs on overtime, I imagine? Anything else I can get you?

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: A motive would be nice.

SUNNY: Maybe if you ask me nicely.

A truck door OPENS, then CLOSES as Sunny enters their truck; a fuck-off-sized pickup, pristine and expensive. Inside the vehicle is quieter than outside, with the ROADSIDE AMBIENCE muffled through the windows.

SUNNY: Look, I'll scope out the guy's hometown, find out if there's a sister, see where she falls on a scale of one to "Cult Leader 2: Reloaded." We go from there.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Go easy on the reports, this trial is giving me enough paperwork as it is. *(Pause)* Investigator?

SUNNY: Yeah?

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: We're pretty sure the cult ends with Moon, but we don't know for sure, especially so soon after his arrest. And you're already spitting distance from Sparville...

SUNNY turns the KEYS in the ignition, and the truck's engine ROARS to life.

SUNNY: Oh my god, this again. Will you just tell me what happened already? Maybe I should be starting my investigation *in* Sparville...

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: *No.* The Sparville incident was serious shit, Sunny. Four people lost their lives.

SUNNY: Yeah, years ago. And, uh, they were in a *cult*? A creepy cult run by the lovechild of David Koresh and Doctor Hammond. As long as you uniforms insist on being so vaguely ominous about what happened in Sparville, I will do my best to be vaguely careful.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: (*Exasperated*) Great. And while you're at it, quit checking your email on the highway, all right? I'll fire over anything the department thinks might be germane to your investigation.

SUNNY: Ooh, more fucked-up VHS cult tapes, please! Enjoy your paperwork, Detective.

SUNNY ends the call with a CLICK. The truck PULLS out onto the highway and SUNNY DRIVES to their destination: the BADLANDS TOWN.

SUNNY: (*To the audience*) So old Detective Nicholson is spooked. Part of me is proud of doing something that would make a cowboy hat-wearing big city cop think twice — the freaky stuff is part of why I went private. On top of the pay.

The other part of me gets it. It's not often that a major city police department asks for a private investigator's help with a case, even less often a cult case. And the Moon case was ...rough.

Music Theme: "Few Colours" BY Otno. Ominous percussion begins.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* I thought it was over. Jasper Moon's behind bars, along with at least a dozen wide-eyed lackeys. Their awful little laundromat-turned-bone-shrine has been scraped clean. And...sure, some mid-tier evidence might be missing, and they're still hoping to dig up a motive, but for Detective Nicholson and the rest of his team, the horror story *is* over.

If only it wasn't for the last little line in that inconvenient manifesto rant: Moon's final parting gift is an administrative nightmare, especially if the press gets wind of it. Loose ends.

So that's why I'm headed down the highway, 90 kilometres-an-hour in a race against the setting sun, to a town famous for sitting on a gold mine of dinosaur bones, and not much else. The sand-coloured hoodoos are already looming on the horizon, and all I have is a potential last name for a sister who probably doesn't even exist. Here we go.

The track builds to its signature crescendo: wary electric guitar and the keens of a theremin. A car wooshes by.

SUNNY: *(Meta, to the audience)* Badlands Cola. Episode One: No Vacancy.

SUNNY turns the RADIO on. They FLIP through channels of retro 60s jams intermingled with fitful STATIC. Barely audible is the VOICE of the radio jockey: STRATHCONA. He speaks over the station's electric guitar identification.

STRATHCONA: *(On radio)* You're listening to 101 FM, the Raptor. Non-stop hits of the 60s, 70s, and 80s.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Radio coverage is still crap, I see.

STRATHCONA: *(On radio)* This next one's a call-in from Amir, who requested something tooth-rottingly sweet, in honour of the Temptations Snowcone Stand reopening after last week's unfortunate occurrence. You know, when someone dumped a mickey of vodka in the shaved ice machine and no one noticed until Hawthorne passed out by the pterodactyl statue on Third? Dangerous. Irresponsible. And the "highlight of the summer," according to Hawthorne.

Anyways, big thanks to Amir for the request, hope this tune hits the spot.

The radio signal CLEARS slightly. It plays "Tempted" by the Hazelnuts through its tinny speakers.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Go straight to the source: that's the conventional wisdom when it comes to finding something, isn't it? But what if you're looking for something that doesn't want to be found? Rule number one of private investigation: first day is about sitting down, shutting up, and watching.

I forge my master plan over the last stretch of highway, yellow strips of paint blurring by as I sharpen up my next steps. Step one: check into my motel. Step two: coast around town to get the lay of the land — hopefully the place is as tiny and quaint as I remember. Step three: find a local watering hole, claim a corner, and absorb.

Part of me seems to remember a retro 24-hour diner? Seems like the perfect place to stake out and see what we can see. If anyone's

feathers are ruffled about Jasper Moon's recent arrest, I'll know about it soon enough.

The song on the radio ENDS, and the radio jockey RETURNS, a light generic DITTY playing beneath the VOICE.

STRATHCONA: *(On the radio)* Before I queue up some more dulcet tones for your dusty Saturday, a quick news update for you: we've got three yard sales on the docket this weekend and, not to be outdone, Mr. Reyes asked me to tell you all that *his* yard sale will have fresh baked cookies. You've been told, people.

The Paleontology Centre is: yep, you guessed it, still closed.

As for the weather, it'll surprise exactly no one to hear that tomorrow's looking sunny sunny sunny, not a cloud in sight.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* The danger of lying in wait is how easy it is to just slip out of things. One moment you're blending into the scenery, absorbing the world, and the next the world is absorbing you. Case details fuse together, the asphalt beneath your tires boils in the heat and your thoughts melt down with it.

So when I see the shimmer on the horizon to my right, I almost dismiss it entirely. Heat haze. A mirage. Nothing.

The ATMOSPHERE inside the truck changes...

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* But the shimmer doesn't look like a mirage, and it doesn't go away. It's bright somehow, like a pure-white shred of cloud or mist way down low on the ground, but my eyes can't focus on it, and it's way too dry for mist.

The truck GEARS DOWN abruptly as SUNNY turns off the highway and GRINDS to a halt on the shoulder. The tension in the air rises.

SUNNY

(Under breath) What the...?

After a hesitant moment, SUNNY exits the truck, leaving the door OPEN as they CRUNCH carefully out into the desert. No CARS coast by, the highway suddenly feeling desolate.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Whatever it is, it's not easier to see outside the truck. The sun is blinding, already burning my hands and face as I shield my eyes and squint into the distance. *Sparville*, I think. *The nearest town is Sparville...*

The shimmer is still there, but somehow seems more solid. Like a pile of shimmering, silver rocks...or perfectly polished bones.

Back in the truck, the RADIO continues on. As the DJ speaks, tension RISES even further...

STRATHCONA: *(On the radio)* But enough of the delightful uplifting news, time for the dismal part of the segment. I know this is still pretty raw for folks, so let's make it quick. Sounds like initial reports we heard out of the city are indeed true: one Jasper Moon has been arrested, and they're throwing the C word around. The other c word. Cult. Official bulletin says he was found in a gutted laundromat with several of his "followers". Authorities are still sifting through the evidence.

There's a rumour around town that some folks are thinking of leaving flowers at the Moon family house, but you know what I think about that. Best to leave it alone folks, trust me.

...Hitting a FEVER PITCH as the radio signal is swallowed by STATIC, and the door to SUNNY's truck suddenly SLAMS shut. A strange blast of wind?

SUNNY SCRAMBLES back to the truck, WRENCHING the door open and throwing themselves back into the driver's seat. They CLOSE the door behind them and TURN OFF the radio with an irritated punch, now more frustrated than frightened.

SUNNY: Stupid. Focus, Sunny.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Focus. The radio. The update on Jasper's arrest. The Moon family house. Private investigation rule number two: you get a lead, you follow it right there and then.

The engine REVS back to life.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* As I pull away, I give myself one glance in the rearview, just to check: but the shimmer is gone. A mirage after all.

SUNNY pulls back out onto the highway and DRIVES into town.

SCENE 101.2

Music: the thrumming, alien licks of an electric guitar.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Usually, a summertime road trip around this part of Canada takes your breath away. The mountains, the green foothills, the rivers raging with the last dregs of glacial runoff.

Then there are the Badlands. They'll take your breath away, for sure, but it's less like a dream vacation, and more like being abducted to Mars.

It's brown, and dry, and rugged as hell — thanks to the hoodoos and mesas: wide, alien towers of stone that seem to scrape up out of the desert all on their own. The rock's soft here, so the wind and rain carve the landscape up into mazes of salt, silt, and shale. Which makes it that much easier to dig up all the bones.

Over 50 fossilized species of ancient life discovered from 500-plus unearthed specimens: it's not just a scientific goldmine, it's a tourism fever dream. You know you're finally in the Badlands proper when the billboards start to look like brontosaurus silhouettes, and the benches turn into little triceratops and stegosaurus. It'd be cute, if it wasn't all rotting into the dirt. The sand, the sun, the heat: nothing lasts long out here. Welcome to the paleontological wonder of the northern hemisphere: which amounts to one aging desert town, and the childhood home of Jasper Moon, cultist extraordinaire.

Guess I'm digging around for something too.

EXT. TOWN STREETS / CREEKHOME - EVENING - D1

SUNNY pilots their truck down the airy streets of the Badlands town; beyond their windows, dogs BARK, and birds CHIRP. Slowing down, they ROLL DOWN their driver side window to get the attention of a passing towns person: the STORE OWNER.

SUNNY: Hi. Hi there! Yeah. Um. I'm so sorry, but I was hoping to leave some nice flowers for the Moon family. Such a shame about the...uh. Do you know where I could find them?

STORE OWNER: The Moon family?

SUNNY: Yes. Um. For the parents. Heard the terrible news about their son, thought it might be nice to let them know they're not alone.

STORE OWNER: Oh sweetheart, the parents are long gone, there's no one there.

SUNNY: Oh. Um. Ha. Of course. Maybe I could still leave them anyways? As a...nice communal gesture?

STORE OWNER: Ehm. Well. I guess you could. The old Moon house is in Creekhorne, by the river. *(Under breath)* Usually.

SUNNY: What do you mean — ?

STORE OWNER: *(Ignoring SUNNY)* Yeah, you just drive until you see the big dinosaur and hang a right!

The STORE OWNER walks away.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* At first I'm just confused, but then I realise.

The truck gains SPEED. Music: warbling, aimless guitar.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* I'd nearly forgotten.

The lime-green shape of a Tyrannosaurus Rex suddenly rears up on the horizon, almost gold in the burnt glow of sunset. A sign declares her as the World's Largest Dinosaur at 90 feet tall; for five dollars, you can take a trip up to her toothy cavern of a mouth and stare out

at the long stretches of rocky nothing. What I don't remember is how weirdly intimidating it is to be in her massive, hot shadow.

Traffic slows a bit at the dinosaur's intersection — closest thing to a traffic jam this place sees, I'm sure — and I take my slow turn to the right into the riverbank neighbourhood. Creekview? Creekhome? Creekhome.

As SUNNY drives at a LOW SPEED, the sounds of gentle summertime suburbia drift in through their open window: children LAUGH and SCREAM, townsfolk CHATTER as they take their after-dinner walks, and wind chimes CLINK in a gentle BREEZE. In the distance, the lazy flow of a drought-weakened RIVER can be heard.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* The houses are pretty here. Compact little units of manicured 70s suburbia, with screen-doors open to the heat and lawns that seem significantly less parched than the rest of town. I pass an empty lot with a "for sale" sign, and even that has nicely cut grass. The sidewalks wind along with the nearby river, easy as can be.

CREEKHOME KID: Hi! Do you want a lemonade? One dollar! Three colours!

SUNNY: Oh, uh. No thank you! Thanks though!

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* It's not a big neighbourhood, but it doesn't take long for the cognitive dissonance to hit hard: this is the neighborhood that birthed a monster.

That grim truth is followed by another: not a single house seems abandoned, or even in disrepair. There are a couple women who look the right age to be the fabled Moon sister, but even from my drive-by

I can see there's zero family resemblance, and if they're stricken by the news of their recently arrested brother, they're doing a great job of hiding it behind their sunhats and homemade margaritas. It starts to dawn on me just how much of a needle in a haystack the detective has sent me after.

I loop around the neighbourhood twice, coasting through every cul-de-sac and alleyway until I start to get the stares, and still: nothing that looks even close to Jasper Moon, his mystery sister, or the family house they supposedly grew up in.

The lemonade kids don't call out to me the second time, or the third; I can barely see them in the dim light of dusk.

Music: quiet, shambling bassline.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* When I first started out — more than ten years ago now — I had to learn to fight the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach whenever a lead started to go cold.

A phone VIBRATES. The sounds of RUMMAGING as SUNNY slows their truck and picks up their phone.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Now, I know that usually means I'm about to stumble onto something really juicy. Sure enough, here's Detective Nicholson in my inbox with another wild email:

"Search uncovered another tape, secure download link below. Might be helpful. Watch only in secure location. Glad you're not squeamish."

SUNNY: Well Detective, I hope the third-rate motel room I booked counts as a secure location.

SCENE 101.3

EXT. MOTEL PARKING LOT / INT. MOTEL LOBBY / INT. MOTEL ROOM
- EVENING - D1

SUNNY crosses an empty parking lot, their lonely FOOTSTEPS sounding forlorn on the heated pavement, the buzz of neon and the dusk songs of CICADAS following them. Another door CHIMES as they enter the COMFORTINA MOTEL LOBBY: ancient air-con HUMS.

SUNNY: Hi there. Is this the Comfortina Motel? Your sign's almost out.

MOTEL OWNER: Ah, shoot. Can't seem to keep the stupid thing fixed. We always just tell folks to take a right at the pterodactyl statue. The one with the blue hat.

SUNNY: ...Yeah. I'll have to remember that.

MOTEL OWNER: You got a room booked?

SUNNY: Oh, yeah, under Nicholson? I called earlier today.

MOTEL OWNER: Ah yeah, I remember you. Got you right here for seven nights.

The MOTEL OWNER fiddles with some PAPERS, pulls something out of a nearby DESK DRAWER.

MOTEL OWNER: Here's your key card: room eight. At the far end, near the ice machine. Door can be a little sticky, so don't be afraid to give'r.

SUNNY: I will also keep that in mind. Thanks.

The door CHIMES again as SUNNY exits back to the benighted parking lot. Music: a distant, glittering trill of synths.

SUNNY *(To the audience):* There's something about motels. Like reality's just sort of...detached. Might just be because I'm running out of energy in a strange town, but the Comfortina hits me hard like that. The worn-out astroturf in the lobby; the long empty stretches of nighttime air between the door to each room; the perma-glow from the Comfortina's dying neon sign: the lettering's all dark, leaving only a pink, buzzing moon. Ironic.

SUNNY swipes their room key, only to be met by a BEEP of failure. They make another attempt, to the same result.

SUNNY: Oh, come on. This is room eight, right?
(Pause, checking key card) Wait. What the — ? This place has two room eights? Could've warned me about *that*, bud.
(Louder, to the possible occupants of the first room eight) Uh, sorry, I think we somehow have the same room number? I think...maybe I'm right beside you — ?

Something THUMPS the door from the other side. There are no voices from within.

SUNNY: Yeah, totally my bad, I'm sorry —

THUMP, THUMP, THUMP. Still, no voices.

SUNNY: Shit. Okay okay okay, I'm going. *Dude. (To self)* They'd better not be banging on the walls like that! Guess I'm room number eight B...

SUNNY swipes their key card again, this time to a much happier BEEP of successful entry.

SUNNY: Ah. Thank you!

They OPEN and CLOSE the door behind them, alone at last. They begin what is clearly a familiar ritual as they think to themselves, CLOSING curtains, TURNING UP the air-con, trying out the SHOWER.

SUNNY: *(To the audience)* Okay. At least it's quiet in here, and my end-of-day routine can start in peace. Close the ungodly stiff curtains, set the red-blinking alarm clock for an early wake-up, get the shower running hot, check my phone to make sure Nicholson's creepy new video is downloading, and...

SUNNY: What? Nine missed calls? When did...?

SUNNY's phone BEEPS as they open their voice mail, anxious to understand.

VOICEMAIL: You have two new messages. First message.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: *(In recorded message, clipped)* Hello, this is Detective Nicholson with a message for Sunny. Call me back when you get this, please. Same number as usual —

VOICEMAIL: Message erased. Next message.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: *(In recorded message)* Hey, been trying to get a hold of you all evening but you must be out of cell range. Call me as soon as you get this, we've got an urgent update regarding your current case. My extension's zero-five—

VOICEMAIL: End of messages. To erase this message, press —

SUNNY DIALS a complex number, listening with held breath as the call RINGS.

SUNNY: *(To self)* Crap. What time is it?

The phone CLICKS as someone on the other end connects.

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Detective Nicholson, Calgary Police Department.

SUNNY: Hey, it's Sunny. Sorry about missing all your calls, I didn't even hear it ring. Is this about the video?

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: The...? No. Sunny, can anyone overhear your conversation right now?

SUNNY: I — no, I'm alone in my motel room. What's going on?

DETECTIVE NICHOLSON: Jasper Moon is missing.

Music: slow, shambling synths emerging from the silence.

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 Ron Guan, Liz Morey, David J. Dixon, Briggon Snow, Ray O'Hare, Sarah Roland, and Jason

Larock. 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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