

# DEAD LANDS







*Deadlands Dime Novel #2*

# INDEPENDENCE DAY

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## PREFACE

Welcome to the latest installment in the ongoing saga of Ronan Lynch. If you picked up *Perdition's Daughter*, the first in our ongoing series of Dime Novels™, then you already know a lot about Ronan, his untimely demise, and his amazing rise from his shallow grave.

At the end of that twisted tale, Ronan was left to explore the whys and wherefores of his second shot at life. Since then, a lot of miles have passed beneath his horse's hooves, and Ronan's had many an adventure worthy of the telling.

He's also struggled with the dark forces animating his corpse. Most times, he's won hands down, but other times it hasn't been so easy. There are gaps in his memory, and for one reason or another, there are a lot of people out there willing to fill the spaces in his rotting brain with lead.

Soon enough, Ronan saw the wisdom of putting Denver in his trail dust. He's wandered up and down the country, and just before this tale begins, he's wandered his way into Kansas, right back where he was at the start of *Perdition's Daughter*.

As the Chinese proverb goes, Ronan's been cursed with an interesting life. We'll get around to telling most all of his story sooner or later, but for now we're going to draw back the curtain and show you just how your favorite undead character spent the centennial celebration of the country he once fought for and has since fallen out of favor with.

We're talking some serious fireworks.

## CHAPTER ONE

The dead man rode into Dodge on a pale horse.

The trail dust clung to his clammy flesh in the hot summer night. He wriggled restlessly in his saddle, more out of habit than stiffness. The wind blew hot out of the west, a breeze straight out of Hell, herding the horse and its heavy load into the Kansas cowtown.

The cadaver's horse clip-clopped through the streets, slowly but surely carrying him into the heart of town. Working his way past the rail yards and the pens full of softly lowing cattle, the corpse neared a pool of light and sound in the otherwise quiet night. A wry smile creased a face weathered by things worse than wind and rain.

As the deceased rider reached the saloon, the tones of a mistuned piano drifted toward his ears. He slowly raised his sal-low face, exposing his dark eyes to the gaslights burning within the place. A freshly painted sign swung over the door on a pair of rusty chains. It read "Dog-Eye's Saloon" in blood-red script.

The dead man dismounted smoothly, showing no strain from his many days on the trail. He tied his horse to the wooden rail outside the boardwalk running in front of the saloon, lest the skittish beast take the opportunity to leave him for good. Then he strode up to the building and knocked open its bat-wing doors.

As he sauntered into the brightly lit room, he reached up to doff his hat and then thought better of it. He walked up to the gleaming bar, sat down in the middle of a row of empty stools and said, "Whiskey," in a voice weary with death.

The bartender, a stout man with a wisp of graying hair wandering over his scalp, turned and slapped the drink down with a practiced move. He stopped and stared at the man through a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles as spit-polished as the mugs shining in the rack behind him. His left eye wandered wide, but his right glared straight at the newcomer.

"Do I know you, stranger?" The bartender's brow furrowed with the effort of boring through the thick layer of grime covering his customer. "Your voice sounds familiar."

The traveler pushed his hat back on his head and looked the bartender in his eyes, a sparkle dancing in his dead orbs. "I spent enough metal in here, Dog-Eye, so you damn well ought to."

The rotgut peddler's eyes snapped back together as they opened wide. "Lynch! I *knew* it was you." A wide grin split the man's head in half. "Where have you been, Ronan? Seems like a month of Sundays since I've seen you around these parts."

"Well," Ronan began as he sipped at his whiskey. Dead or not, the stuff burned down just the way he liked it. "These eyes have seen a lot since they last set on Dodge."

The two men chatted lightly, covering matters ranging from new ventures to old friends. Dog-Eye slung liquor and brew as he talked, collecting cash and making change with barely a thought.

"Good sir," came a voice on breath almost polluted enough to be flammable. "I was wondering if I might impose upon your kindness."

Ronan turned to his left to see a man in a tattered, black jacket whose drawn, yellowed skin indicated the damage he'd done to his liver. The rumpled figure leaning low against the bar slouched in stark contrast with the clipped, Eastern accent of an educated man.

"Hey, Clayton, lay off," Dog-Eye intervened. "This is an old friend of mine, and he doesn't need to be bothered by the likes of you."

The drunk smacked his lips and stared at the bartender with watery eyes. "Pardon my intrusion, kind sir. I find myself short of funds, and I only meant to inquire whether or not this man—of obvious good standing in your estimation—could see fit to float me a small amount to see me through the night." He looked up at Ronan with eyes that betrayed the desperation his voice sought to hide.

"Ah, Hell," Ronan said half to himself. Since his demise, he couldn't get drunk any more, and he'd really enjoyed tying one on every so often back in his breathing days. He still drank for the flavor and the way it felt sliding down his throat, but it wasn't really the same.

He pointed at a bottle of whiskey behind the bar and nodded at Dog-Eye. "Make it a double."

Clayton's face lit up like a bad boy's face on Christmas day when he realizes he's getting presents instead of coal. "Why thank you, sir. You are a gentleman of the first order, you are. If I can ever repay the favor, you should certainly let me know, and I'll do so straight away."

Dog-Eye slapped the drink down in front of him and slid it along the bar. Clayton caught it and held on to it like a man thrown a lifesaver. "Move along now, eh?"

"Certainly, kind sirs. So sorry to bother you. It won't happen again. A thousand blessings upon you and your kin." The man's speech trailed off as he stumbled back to his table to nurse his precious drink.

Ronan watched him for a long moment—lost in thought about his own life, such as it was—until Dog-Eye brought him back with a laugh. "It sure is good to see you, Lynch. Seems like forever and a day since we served the Union."

Ronan turned to survey the lightly crowded main room. Folks of all sorts were sitting about, some drinking, some talking, some gambling, and a few ladies working. "Looks like you're working both sides of the Mason-Dixon line these days."

Dog-Eye smiled sheepishly. "That's Dodge for you. We get all kinds. The city council says there's no such thing as national politics in this town. They just want everyone to live together in peace and harmony and all that rot. In spite of that, we're having us a shindig for the Fourth of July, just like the big city."

"Them fools are throwing rocks at a hornet's nest. Last I checked, both sides were claiming all of Kansas."

A hungry grin split Dog-Eye's face. "Sure, the council knows better, but a holiday means a celebration, and a celebration means visitors. Visitors mean money, and money's good for Dodge. And since the council's got its hands in most every pocket that's not buttoned up tighter than a monk's mouth, that means the holiday's good for Dodge."

Ronan sipped his whiskey. "I ain't much on politics myself."

Caught up in the conversation, Ronan hadn't noticed the men creeping up behind him, but when the entire bar fell silent, he knew something was up. He glanced past Dog-Eye's shoulder and saw three men standing behind him, one to each side and the last directly to his rear.

"Mister," came a voice in that Southern drawl that always set Ronan on edge, "you stink."

Dog-Eye glared at the man. "Jake Simpkins, you just sit your butt back down in your chair. This here's an old friend, and he's not looking for trouble."

The sandy-haired Rebel pitched back his head and laughed. "Hell, Dog, I ain't lookin' fer any kind of trouble. Me and my boys were jes' sitting back there enjoyin' our drinks when this pile o' road apples strutted on in."

The bartender put down the mug he'd been polishing and raised his hands. "Look, Jake, my friend here's been on the road a long time, and he hasn't had the time to have himself a proper bath."

Ronan watched Simpkins' reflection in the mirror behind the bar as he went on. "Well, Dog, I think we'd be happy to help your Yankee friend out there. There's a trough out front, and if it's good enough for our horses to drink outta, it oughta be good enough for a jackass like him. Ain't that right, Ralphie?"

The shorter man to Simpkins' right—a greasy fellow hardly more than a boy but with a wild look in his eyes—cackled right on cue. "You got that right, Jake. You sure do! Let's dunk him. Ha-ha!"

"Sounds like a fine idea to me. We'll be doin' this fair city a public service." Simpkins' reached out and put a hand on Ronan's shoulder.

The dead gunslinger swung around and, with one swift move, smashed his whiskey glass square into Simpkins' forehead. The Rebel staggered back into a table full of gamblers, upending it and spilling drinks, cards, and coins everywhere.

The man that had been to Simpkins' left darted forward at Ronan with a right cross. Ronan took the blow square on his face, then reached over and grabbed a barstool unfazed. He stopped for a moment and smiled at the man's reaction before bringing the barstool up and across the man's jaw.

The man keeled over backward, and a bottle shattered to Ronan's left. He drew his gun, cocked it, and turned in a smooth arc, planting the barrel smack between Ralphie's eyes. The startled Rebel stopped cold in his tracks, the broken bottle still in his hand, ready to be stabbed into Ronan's neck.

The world froze.

Simpkins scrambled to his feet, as did Ronan's other attacker. Both stood a ways off, waiting to see what would happen. The only sound in the entire bar was Ralphie's labored breath and the drip-drip of his blood splatting on the wooden floor.

A drop of sweat beaded on Ralphie's forehead and rolled down the bridge of his nose, splashing down on the cool, iron barrel of Ronan's Peacemaker as he tried to figure if the gunslinger was bluffing. He decided to try his luck.

As Ralphie jabbed the bottle at Ronan's neck, Ronan swung his arm down, smashing the bottle into Ralphie's hand. Ronan knew the crude shards couldn't hurt him—what did a dead man have to fear from a cut?—but Dog-Eye and the rest of Dodge didn't need to know that, or they'd likely burn him at the stake.

While Ralphie was screaming and staring at the shreds of his hand, Ronan clubbed him with his pistol, and the young Rebel fell to the ground unconscious.

Ronan looked around the bar calmly. Simpkins looked at his other friend and saw that his spine had left him.

"God almighty, Ronan!" spoke Dog-Eye nervously. "The West treated you well. I've never seen anyone move that fast."

Ronan watched as a look of recognition dawned on Simpkins' face at the mention of his name. The Rebel leader turned and looked at his unsnoring friend. "C'mon, kid. If we can't freshen this here place up a bit, we'd best be movin' on."

As Simpkins headed for the door, Ronan booted Ralphie in his direction. "Don't forget your friend here. If you want to sleep in Dog-Eye's you got to pay for a room." Simpkins pointed to the other Rebel, who scooped up his injured friend and dragged him out into the night.

Ronan turned toward the barkeeper and flipped him an Eagle. "Speaking o' which..."

Dog-Eye caught the coin and bit it before slipping it into the pocket of his apron. "Your old room's open. And I'll have Suzy Winger draw you a bath on the house."

Ronan eyed the bartender. "Your concern's touching."

Dog-Eye laughed. "Concern? Hell, like it or not, those Rebels were right. You stink to high Heaven!"

## CHAPTER TWO

The rapping at the door sounded like someone pounding on his coffin. Since he'd died several months back, Ronan didn't sleep much. The kinds of dreams he had when he did visit the Sandman made him think twice about sawing wood.

He walked over to the door and swung it wide, jamming his Peacemaker straight over the threshold. Suzy Winger, the soiled dove that had drawn his bath the night before, stifled a scream. "I'm sorry, sir," she said as she brought her hand away from her Cupid's-bow lips, painted crimson at even this early hour. "You startled me."

"Sorry about that, ma'am." Ronan holstered his pistol, looking at Suzy with chagrin. Last year at this time, he'd have swept the sweet, young thing into the room and had his wicked way with her. These days, he had little use for beautiful things of any kind. His was an ugly world.

"Excuse me, sir. I've got a message for you from our local deputy. He wants to see you right away."

Ronan grunted noncommittally. Suzy handed a calling card to him. He looked at it as he shut the door without saying another word.

The card gave the address of the nearest deputy's station. The name read Wyatt Berry Stapp Earp.

\* \* \*

"Glad to see you could make it, Lynch." Earp's grip was strong like Ronan expected. Earp was a handsome man with wavy dark hair, and he sported a well-waxed handlebar mustache. The hard look in his eyes told Ronan this wasn't a social visit.

Ronan tossed his hat onto the rack in the corner of the tiny office, took the chair Earp motioned toward, and propped his boots on the deputy marshal's desk. Earp ignored it and sat down behind the desk. With a sigh that said he'd already done this a few times today, he put his own boots up and started in on his speech.

"As you might have heard, the Mayor's decided we need to have a celebration for the Fourth of July. Normally I'd disagree with him, seeing as how we're smack in the middle of the Disputed Lands, but since this year's the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the Union—shattered as it might be—I'm all for it."

Earp cut himself a plug of chaw and, not bothering to offer Ronan a piece for himself, popped in into his lower lip.

"The fact is about half our populace doesn't care much for the Union and would sooner celebrate its demise. Still, most folks are good enough to keep their yaps shut until it all blows over. It's up to the fine police force of Dodge City—your looking at your local rep—to keep the peace."

Earp stopped to give Ronan a hard look. "After all, that's what they pay us for."

The office lay quiet for a moment until Ronan realized that Earp was waiting for him to speak. He took his feet off the desk and leaned forward in his chair.

"But you've got more trouble to take care of than they *can* pay you for."

Earp shot Ronan with his index finger. "Smart man."

"How long?"

"Today's the second. We need you until the morning of the fifth."

"How much?"

Earp leaned over and let loose at a spittoon, hitting it dead on.

"Twenty bucks a day."

"I'm worth twice what everyone else is getting."

Earp grinned. "That already is."

## CHAPTER THREE

"The Devil's got you all by the throat, and he's dragging you straight down to hell!"

The shrill voice speared through the murmuring at Dog-Eye's saloon like an arrow through a buffalo's eye. Ronan turned on his stool to see a middle-aged scarecrow of a woman in her high-necked, long-sleeved dress stamp into the room. She wore a large, white sandwich board which read "AVOID THE FOUL TEMPTATION OF SATAN'S TOOL! LIQUOR IS LUCIFER'S DRINK!" in fiery red ink, and she was distributing handbills emblazoned with the same message to Dog-Eye's patrons.

Ronan didn't need to read the flyers to know what they said.

"Ida Mae! Get your squeaky-clean rear out of my saloon!" Dog-Eye roared from behind the bar. "You're bothering my customers."

The steely-eyed, gray-haired woman ignored the bartender's request and stormed forward. "You, sir, are the worst of the lot. These poor souls may be addicted to their disgusting needs, but it is *you* who actually does the Devil's work by filling their glasses with your foul brews!"

Dog-Eye calmly picked up a glass from behind the bar, spit in it, and began polishing it. "Now look here, Ida Mae—"

The woman extended a finger straight at Dog-Eye's nose, halting only an inch away. His lazy eye snapped to focus on the tip of the woman's finely manicured nail. "That's Miss Hobart to you, sir. You shall treat me as a lady, even in this den of sin!"

The menace in her voice was enough to make a man go for his guns, but Dog-Eye held his ground. His face flushed beet red, but he simply spit into his mug again and kept polishing.

"Ronan," he said, "Earp didn't give you that deputy's star for nothing. This woman's disturbing my peace."

A thin-lipped smile cracked the woman's wrinkled face as she turned to Ronan. "Yes, deputy, you're new around here. Who do *you* think is in the right here? A God-fearing woman with the power of her church on her side? Or a willing pawn of Satan serving up the polluted waters burning with the fires of the Dark Lord's realm?"

Ronan reached back, retrieved his drink, and slowly took a sip, his eyes never leaving the woman's the entire time. As he watched her, the crimson color rose from the frilly top of her high-necked dress until it met her hairline, her taut smile transforming into a sharp frown.

"Well, ma'am," Ronan began, then raised his hand to cut her interruption short, "Miss Hobart. There's no law against serving liquor in a saloon."

"God's law transcends that of man!"

"God's not paying me to wear this badge."

Ida Mae screwed her mouth up in determination and wagged her finger in Ronan's face. "How can you say such things in this house of ill repute, a place where *women*—" she gestured directly at Suzy Winger, who was sitting on the lap of a well-dressed man with his arms wrapped around her waist, "and I use the term loosely—sell their bodies, caring not that their immortal souls are forfeit with the bargain.

"You, sir," she pointed at the man Suzy was sitting on, "I can see by the ring on your hand that you are a married man." The man flushed with embarrassment and would not meet Ida Mae's eyes. "You have purchased a ticket on the express train to the Underworld, where you will lie in eternal flames next to this whore!"

Ida Mae turned back to Ronan, pleading with him for help. "A good man would take a stand against such sins." Fire gleamed in her eyes.

Ronan snorted softly at the woman. Then he turned cold. "Are you going to walk out of this place, or am I going to have to throw you out?"

Ida Mae's eyes shot wide, and her color turned even redder. "You wouldn't dare," she said in a whisper low and thin like the sound of a sidewinder in the sand.

Ronan finished off his drink and tossed his glass to the floor. In the silence of the room, the shattering shards sounded like sharp thunder. He looked her directly in the eyes with absolutely nothing in his soul.

"Try me."

Ida Mae tried to hold Ronan's stare, but after a long moment she failed.

She turned and stomped off. The back of her sandwich board read "GOD WILL CLEANSE THIS EARTH OF SINNERS WITH HIS RIGHTEOUS WRATH!"

As she stormed toward the bat-wing doors and the late afternoon sun, she shot back over her shoulder, "The spirit of the devil lives in the spirits you pour down your heathen throats!"

Just as she reached the threshold, she spun and pointed directly at Ronan, her voice shrill and high. "And you, sir—and I use that term *extremely* loosely—are little more than a grim servant of Death!"

As she stomped away down the boardwalk, Dog-Eye was already pouring Ronan another drink. As he took it, the dead man muttered under his breath, "You don't know the half of it."

## CHAPTER FOUR

"Have a flyer, sir?" Ronan looked up from his drink, half expecting to see Ida Mae back in Dog-Eye's saloon. Ronan figured that the most trouble in the area was likely to come out of Dog-Eye's, so he had made it his office for the duration of his short term as Dodge City deputy. Dog-Eye, happy to know the law would never be absent in his place during the Fourth of July celebration, had put out the word that the local deputy could be found in his place.

Suzy had hung around him for a while, but she had soon gotten the hint that he wasn't buying what she was selling. She had disappeared soon after with that Northerner whose lap she'd been perched on when Ida Mae had rolled through. There hadn't been anything else worth looking at hanging around, so he'd returned to his bottle.

When Ronan swiveled around, he was expecting trouble. What he got was a leaflet. He took it from the earnest, young black man with the shaved head. It read "END THE DISPUTE. KANSAS IS A STATE DIVIDED AND MUST REJOIN THE UNION. AS KANSAS GOES, SO GOES THE UNION. REUNITE OUR STATE. REUNITE OUR NATION."

It went on to describe the reasons why Kansans should push for total rejection of the Confederacy's claim on the area. It was clearly written and well-worded. Ronan handed it back to the man.

"Save your paper for someone who gives a damn."

"But, sir," the young man began with a big-toothed smile.

"Look, kid," Ronan started.

"Walter Jackson, sir."

"I fought for the Union a long time ago, and I'm done with that life. I'm on to something new now."

Walter looked Ronan directly in the eyes. "Sir, if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

Before Ronan could respond, a voice rang out from the direction of the door. "You got that right, mister, and I'd say yer part of the problem!"

As Ronan turned, he saw one of the men who'd accosted him the night before standing in the doorway. He was holding one of Walter's flyers crumpled in his bandaged hand. Walter smiled uneasily as the man stepped across the threshold.

"Please, I'm not looking for any trouble."

Ralphie flashed a greasy grin. "Then I'd say yer in the wrong place. I told you what I'd do to you if I caught you passin' out them pieces o' paper again."

Walter stood his ground. "I got a right to pass out whatever kind of paper I like, and I can have whatever I like printed on it. It's part of the Bill of Rights."

A loose guffaw escaped from Ralphie's mouth. "That's a Union scrap of paper, mister, and it's worth about as much in these parts as the outhouse paper you've been passin' out all around town. Me and the rest of the Wilderness Riders ain't got any use for it at all."

The sound of a thumb cocking a Peacemaker put the conversation to a halt. Ralphie and Walter turned to eye Ronan as he leveled the barrel of his gun at the border ruffian. Ralphie's eyes were as big around as a buffalo's.

"You're with the Wilderness Riders?" Ronan asked.

Ralphie's right hand wandered unconsciously down to his own gun. "Think hard about that hand," Ronan warned. "You don't want to lose it."

Ralphie caught himself and threw both hands into the air. "Hold on here, mister. I don't want no trouble?"

Walter chuckled softly. "Is that so?"

Ronan ignored him. "If you're a Wilderness Rider, there's a price on your head. Yesterday I might have tried to collect that, but today I'm wearing this badge, and it's my job to keep the peace instead."

The dead man let his words sink in like rain into the cracked surface of the desert. "Just don't go causin' any trouble in my part o' Dodge, or I'll plant you in the nearest bone orchard and harvest that reward."

Ralphie brought his hands wide. "I ain't got a problem with you, Lynch, just the stuff this Yankee's handin' out."

"There's no law against that, North or South. Leave before I part your greasy scalp with a lead comb."

Walter grinned wide. "You heard what the man said. Beat it, Ralphie."

"I don't have to take that from you," Ralphie snarled and then turned toward Ronan. "You best watch yer own step, 'deputy.' You can't hide behind that badge forever."

Ronan stated flatly, "Tomorrow's the third, kid, and I'm turning in my badge on the fifth. After that, you and your friends are fair game."

"If I were you, I'd start running now."

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With that, Ronan fanned his gun at Ralphie's feet, raining bullets after the man as he pushed his way into the street and fled like the Devil himself was on his heels.

When the gunfire stopped, Ronan flipped open his gun's cylinder and slowly reloaded it one bullet at a time. As he did, Walter turned to him and extended his hand. Ronan shook it in between bullets.

"Thanks, sir. I don't carry a gun myself, and that hooligan knows it."

"Next time, just ask for my help."

"Maybe you're more a part of the solution than you might think."

"That's what they're paying me for."

## CHAPTER FIVE

It had been way too simple so far. Hardly worth \$5 a day, much less \$20. It was close on midnight, and if tomorrow and the next day went as clean as today, this was going to be some easy money. Ronan was thinking just that when he heard the scream.

It came from the back part of the saloon, in the direction of Ronan's room. Before he knew it, Ronan was across the main room and up the stairs to the second floor, his gun already in his hand.

When he got to the back hallway, he saw six doors, three on each side, all closed. Before he could start breaking down the doors one by one, the scream came again. It was the second door on the left.

He kicked the door open, shattering the cheap frame. He stepped into the room and straight into Hell.

Suzy Winger was kneeling in her bed, out of which something was still pumping bright, arterial blood. The window over her bed had been shattered, and shards of glass lay everywhere. Lacy curtains fluttered in the wind.

Suzy took one look at Ronan and screamed again. Startled, he swung his gun her direction, then realized she was hardly going to hurt him.

He leaped straight over her cringing form, clearing the bed entirely, and glared out the window. His eyes scanned the darkness for something—anything—but found nothing.

Then he thought he saw some movement off to the left, and he fired at it. Nothing responded.

Behind him, Suzy screamed again and scrambled off the bed. Ronan heard her hitting the wooden floor and then scrabbling across it toward the open door. He spun around and looked behind him to find that Suzy wasn't the only one who'd been in the bed.

There in the center of a still-growing pool of blood that was slowly spreading across the white sheets, staining them a vibrant scarlet, lay a man's body.

In the low lamplight, Ronan reached down to feel the man's neck for a pulse, but the head wasn't there. Neither were either of the man's arms. Blood still leaked from all three massive wounds.

"Damn."

Ronan strode around the bed and grabbed Suzy roughly. All her limbs were still attached, and her screams said her head hadn't gone anywhere.

He slapped her once to bring her to her senses. She kept screaming, her eyes focused into some kind of Hell far beyond the room's four walls. He slapped her again.

This time she looked him in the eyes, wrapped her arms around his middle, and began to sob. He grabbed her by the shoulders and demanded to know what had happened.

It was a long moment before she could speak.

As she choked back sobs, Ronan wondered what kind of creature could have hurt a man the way he'd just seen. To be able to decapitate a man, cut off both his arms, and leave the room while his heart was still beating just didn't seem possible—at least not for anything human.

Of course, the world was full of impossible and inhuman things. Ronan himself was living proof of that—walking proof, at least.

"It—it was some kind of monster," Suzy gasped, finally finding her breath.

"What kind of monster?" Ronan pressed. "What did it look like?"

"Dear God."

Ronan looked up to see Dog-Eye standing in the doorway, a double-barreled shotgun hanging loosely in his right hand. He ignored the bartender and turned back to the girl. She just sat there sobbing, unable to catch her breath enough to speak more.

Ronan stood. As he darted past Dog-Eye, he barked out orders. "Get her out of here, but stay with her. There's nothing to be done for her friend."

Ronan ran down the stairs and took the back door out of the saloon. He raced around to the wall beneath Suzy's room. Glass and wood from the window panes were strewn about the dusty ground.

He looked up and saw a piece of white cloth hanging from the ragged edge of what was left of the window panes. He'd have to check that out later.

In the meantime, he looked around for tracks in the dirt and found a fresh set from a pair of boots. The trail moved off around the building, and Ronan followed it, hoping the killer

would keep to the back alleys and avoid the streets, making it easier for Ronan to track him. When Ronan reached the saloon's corner, though, the tracks turned onto the street and disappeared into the hard-packed lane.

Before he had a chance to think about it much, a gunshot cracked in the distance.

## CHAPTER SIX

Ronan dashed around the corner to see a crowd of people cheering and jeering at something. He pushed through the folks in front of him and found himself in a large circle centered around Walter Jackson and Ralphie.

"Ain't so tough now, are you, mister?" Ralphie cackled, letting loose another round at the Northerner's feet. "Dance like yer life depended on it." He fired off another round and then leveled the gun at Walter's head. "Because it does."

Walter had already been beaten pretty badly. His face was bruised and bleeding, and his left arm was hanging at an odd angle. He looked straight down the barrel of Ralphie's gun and said, "Quit cackling about it, Rebel. If you're going to pull that trigger, just get it over with."

Ralphie thumb-cocked his Colt Navy's hammer. "You folks heard him. I've got me more'n a score o' witnesses that can honestly say you asked for it!"

Ralphie cackled one final time as he sighted straight down the barrel of his gun at a spot in the center of Walter's forehead. Walter looked up and saw his death in Ralphie's eyes, but he met the stare coldly, refusing to give his killer the satisfaction of flinching away.

Suddenly a shot rang out. Walter blinked and saw Ralphie sprawled in the street, grasping his bleeding arm. His gun lay beside him in the street, its barrel still cold and its hammer still cocked.

Ralphie scrambled to his feet and snatched at his gun, but another shot rang out, knocking the pistol even further away. It was then he finally turned around to see Ronan standing at the edge of the circle, his smoking gun ready to unleash more leaden death.

"You shot me, you son of a bitch!"

"It serves you right, you ruffian!" Ida Mae Hobart piped up from one edge of the circle. She was still wearing her sandwich board. "He who lives by the gun is bound to die by it."

Ronan stared at Ralphie with death in his eyes. "That's one wise woman."

While Ralphie lay squirming on the ground, a drunken man staggered out of the crowd to kneel at Walter's side. He leaned over Walter's injured arm and laid his hands on it firmly. Walter

gave a stifled groan as the man twisted his arm back into place and then tore off the hem of his stained, white shirt to fashion a quick sling.

With that done, the drunk stood back up, belched once loudly, and keeled over cold on the street. "Damnation," Ronan muttered, finally recognizing the dozing figure he'd bought a whiskey for the night before.

All the while, Ronan had kept his gun on Ralphie as he lay bleeding in the street. "Buck up, kid. We've got a doctor for you right here." Dog-Eye set to waking Clayton up, but he hardly had a chance to get started.

Just then, a gravelly voice came from off to one side, "Deputy, you just made yer last mistake." Ronan turned to see Jake Simpkins and four of his Wilderness Riders standing at the far edge of the crowd.

The circle quickly broke apart as people made to get out of the line of fire. None of the Riders had a gun out yet, and there were only five of them against Ronan. They didn't stand a chance.

Ronan knew his undead form could catch bullets all day and only feel a bit heavier from all the lead. He'd found that out the hard way over the past few months on more than one uncomfortable occasion.

Still, he didn't want the fact he wasn't drawing breath to be revealed. He'd barely healed over the rope burns on his neck from the last time that had happened.

"Give it up, Lynch. Yer outgunned," Simpkins drawled.

"I don't see it that way. There's five of you. I got a bullet left for each."

Simpkins laughed, but not as cockily as he could have.

"Just shoot 'im, Jake!" Ralphie whined.

"Shut up, kid. I'm making the calls here."

Pale and shaky, Ralphie staggered to his feet. "But Jake—"

Daggers flew from Simpkins' eyes. "I said shut up. You've been trouble enough tonight."

Ida Mae, closer to the action than most of the citizens whose good sense had sent them scrambling to the boardwalks, cackled loudly at that.

"Shut up, ya old biddy!" Ralphie lunged at her weakly, but tripped, stumbling into her and knocking them both into a nearby horse's trough.

Finally awakened by all the commotion, the still-inebriated Clayton staggered over to the sloshing duo to help them out of their entanglement. He offered Ralphie a hand and got shoved flat on his back for his troubles, to the nervous delight of the crowd.

"Well, I say! That's a deucedly hard way to repay a kindness!" Clayton roared.

He was quickly drowned out by the shrill words of Ida Mae. "Deputy!" she screamed at Ronan. "Deputy. I demand you haul this hooligan in. I've never been so humiliated in all my life!"

Ronan turned to face Simpkins and his men. "You're about to be in good company."

"The only way she's going to be in yer company, Deputy, is if she's fillin' a coffin tomorrow mornin'." Simpkins rested his hand on his pistol butt. "I'm tired o' this dancin' around, boys. Show's over, and it's curtains for you, Lynch."

At that moment, a shot rang out, and Simpkins' holed Stetson went scattering toward Ronan, sailing through the air for a moment before coming to rest at his feet.

The Wilderness Riders parted like the Red Sea, and behind them strode forth a one-eyed man in a long, black duster with a tin star gleaming on his lapel. Even from this distance, Ronan was sure he knew what the engraving on it read: Texas Ranger.

"The name's Ketchum," the Ranger bellowed in a long Dallas drawl, "and them boys were right about only one thing: the show's over. Everybody git the Hell outta here and go to sleep."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Ronan walked over to Earp's office the next morning, figuring there'd be Hell to pay.

He walked in and found Earp there with his feet up on his desk. He was talking with a tall man with short, salt-and-pepper hair sitting in the other small room's other chair. The man turned as Ronan entered. It was Ketchum.

"Come on in, Lynch," Earp said grimly. "Don't worry about knocking." He swept his arm out at the Texas Ranger, sitting there in his shirtsleeves and a vest. "I understand you two have already met."

"Not formally," said Ketchum as he stood to his towering full height and extended his hand. "Name's Hank Ketchum. Folks call me One-Eye." Ronan would have sworn the man was winking at him from behind the black patch over his right eye. In another life, Ketchum would have been right at home on the high seas. He sailed the high plains instead.

Ketchum's grip was strong, but Ronan hardly felt it. He grunted politely and sauntered over to lean against the iron bars of the cell in the corner.

"The quiet type, eh?" Ketchum grinned. "That's all right, Lynch. I know all 'bout you. I 'spect you might not have needed my help last night, but you know how innocent folks tend to get hurt around them kinda fights."

Ronan folded his arms in front of himself, letting his left hand rest on the butt of the pistol on his right hip.

"So what's the deal?" he asked Earp.

The lawman gave Ronan a cold stare. "As I understand it, a man was killed on your watch last night. I know you didn't budge much off that barstool o' yours, but I was hoping you'd have been able to stop a killing in the same damn saloon."

Ronan took the deputy star off his shirt, but Earp raised a hand to stop him before he could toss it on the desk. "That's not why I called you in, Lynch. Dog-Eye's already told me all about it. There wasn't anything you could've done about it."

"Still," Earp's eyes narrowed, "a man got killed, so we aren't particularly keen on paying you for protecting that little corner of our town."

Earp cut Ronan off before he could open his mouth. "I talked to the town council, though, and we worked out a deal. They want this killer caught right away before he spoils the whole town's reputation right when we got us some notice for something good."

Earp stood and looked evenly at Ronan, then to One-Eye and back. "It's \$500 to the man who brings this butcher in. Dead or alive doesn't make no difference to me. Just as long as he's done."

Ketchum stood up and grinned savagely. "Well, Yankee, it looks like you've got yerself a partner."

Ronan snorted. "Think again, Ranger. I was hired to protect a part of this town, and paid or not, I'm doing the job I agreed to."

He looked at the badge as he hefted it in his hand. "Don't you worry yourself, Earp."

Ronan glared right into Earp's eyes, and the lawman returned the favor. The dead man pitched the badge onto Earp's desk. "I'll get that killer, and it won't be for the reward."

Ronan nodded at Hank as he walked out the door. "It's a matter of pride."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Back in Dog-Eye's that night, Ronan was sipping his whiskey straight from the bottle. He'd been all over the neighborhood that day, hunting for some answers to the questions last night's corpse had posed.

Nobody seemed to know the man who'd been killed. Identifying him hadn't been easy with his head and arms missing, but Ronan had recognized the clothes on him. They belonged to the man that Suzy had been plying with her attentions earlier the evening of the murder.

He asked around, but no one knew much about the man, and Suzy was still too far out of her head to answer any questions. He'd tried talking to her a couple times, but she'd either been sleeping or sobbing. All he'd been able to get out of her was the one word she kept repeating: "Monster."

Ronan had examined the body after the crowd dispersed that night. By the time he got back to the room, Dog-Eye was already busy cleaning the place up. One of Suzy's girlfriends had taken her off to the doctor's, but the corpse was still there, and it had finally stopped bleeding.

The cuts were clean and professional. The arms had been taken right at the shoulder joint, and the neck had been severed directly between two of the vertebrae.

Ronan had searched the body and found papers sewn into the lining of the man's coat. He ripped them out and read them, and they revealed the man to be Paul Goodwin. He was a Pinkerton detective, which presumably made him a spy for the Union army.

Ronan had taken the scrap of cloth from the window too. It was grimy, once-white silk. He had stuffed it into his pocket.

As Ronan motioned for a fresh bottle of whiskey, he thought about what the papers meant. If Goodwin was a spy, then Suzy Winger was probably selling him information instead of her body. That would explain why they were both fully clothed when the killer attacked.

A lot of people weren't too careful about what they said in front of paid company. Suzy probably knew all sorts of juicy details and pumped her customers hard for more to keep Goodwin and his Union cash coming back. If someone had been suspicious, they might have decided she had to die. Goodwin might have tried to stop them and paid the ultimate price for his valor.

Or it could have been some enemy of Goodwin. Spies were certain to make more than a few foes. In bloody Kansas, there were plenty of Rebels ready to cut a Yankee spy's throat.

Or could it have been Ida Mae? She had publicly chastised the couple right in front of Ronan. As far as he knew, she was the only one to have acknowledged a problem with either Suzy or her supposed paramour. Ronan doubted that such a woman could have committed that kind of a killing, but then again, he'd seen stranger things over the past few years.

Even though she was annoying, though she hardly seemed psychotic. Besides, she sure had more reason to go after Ralphie. Of course, he hadn't knocked her around until after Goodwin's murder. But maybe she'd hired someone to take care of the killing for her.

"I'll be damned," whispered Ronan as he took another belt from his bottle. It was all too confusing, and he didn't have a single real lead.

"You got that right," rumbled Ketchum as he thundered through Dog-Eye's swinging doors. Ronan turned to face him full on.

"Whoa there, pardner," Ketchum put up his hands. "Don't get yer chaps in a bunch. I'm just here to have a drink."

## INDEPENDENCE DAY

He motioned for Dog-Eye to get him a glass. The saloonkeeper set it in front of him, and Ketchum proceeded to pick up Ronan's bottle and pour himself a drink.

Ronan watched him with mild interest. "And you're wanting my whiskey?"

"Well," Ketchum drawled as he settled down into the stool next to the dead man. "That and maybe a little professional courtesy."

Ketchum stared at Dog-Eye a long moment before the bartender got the idea to leave. Ronan checked the clock above the bar. It was fast closing on midnight. Independence Day was almost here.

Sure that no one could listen in on their conversation, Ketchum shifted his steely one-eyed glare to the mirror behind the bar. "You see, Lynch, I'm a monster hunter, and you, well you're a monster."

Ronan didn't say a word.

"I know all about you and yer kind, Lynch. Y'ain't the only one who's come back from the dark side o' death.

"Normally it's my job to hunt critters like you down and shoot 'em or recruit 'em. I figured I'd try recruitin' first."

Ronan snorted, "The only 'we' here is me and my gun."

"Think that if you like. I got an idea what's goin' on here, and if I'm right—"

Before Ketchum could complete his thought, a man—Ronan recognized him as one of the Wilderness Riders—stormed into the bar, shouting, "Ranger! There's been another killin'!"

Ronan cursed and finished his drink before following Ketchum and the man out into the street.

## CHAPTER NINE

The body in the back alley a few blocks from Dog-Eye's had even less parts left on it than Paul Goodwin's. This one was missing both legs and arms, but its head was still attached. The small crowd around it parted as Ronan and Ketchum drew near. Ronan knew who it was before he looked at the corpse's face.

"Ralphie."

Ketchum reached down and shut the young Rebel's horrified eyes, which looked like they were staring right into the heart of Hell. "The kid from last night, eh? Shame." He shook his head. "No one deserves to go like that."

Ronan looked down at the body and whispered, "Texas, there ain't no good way to go."

"Get yer slimy hands offa that kid, Yankee!" Ronan looked up to see Jake Simpkins bearing down on him. He stood and let his hand rest on his gun, but before he or Simpkins could make a move, Ketchum intervened.

"You just calm yerself, son," he said in a gruff voice.

## INDEPENDENCE DAY

"Listen here, Ranger. That man killed Ralphie. I'd put every dollar I got on it."

"And you'd lose 'em both. I was with Lynch when yer man came callin' fer help. This body's fresh as a new-cut daisy. There's no way he coulda done it."

Simpkins tried to push past Ketchum. "You'll fergive me, lawman, if I don't take yer word fer it."

Simpkins didn't see Ketchum's fist until it smacked him between the eyes and set him flat on his rump. "I won't. Get yer butt outta here, less'n ya wanna be on it permanently, Rebel or no."

Simpkins stood up and spit a tooth at Ketchum's feet. "Yer a low-down traitor, sidin' with that Yankee. Y'ain't fit ta wear that star."

Ketchum drew his gun before Simpkins could even move, and he jammed it up under the Southerner's nose. "I'm willin' to cut ya some slack 'cause you just lost a brother," Ketchum stated flatly. "Otherwise I'd be addin' to yer nostril collection."

Ketchum gave him a shove with his free hand. "Move along, and take yer friends with ya. I've got this under control."

Simpkins backed off down the alley, keeping his eyes on the barrel of Ketchum's gun. He waved the rest of the Wilderness Riders along with him. "You just bought yerself a plot in Boot Hill, Ranger."

Ketchum turned around and ignored him. "You wanna kill me, yer gonna have to get in line."

## CHAPTER TEN

Back in Dog-Eye's saloon, the owner was getting ready to close the place down for the night. It was empty except for him, Ketchum, and Ronan. "Got a big day tomorrow," he explained, "and it's late."

He favored Ronan with his non-wandering eye. "I'm pretty sure I can leave the place in your hands, Lynch." He set a fresh bottle of whiskey on the bar and two glasses, looking hard at Ketchum as he did.

"You and your friend here should keep each other honest. Help yourselves. I'm going to bed." With that, the man trundled off into the rooms that he kept for himself in the back of the building's bottom floor.

Ketchum bellied up to the bar and poured a couple inches into each glass. Then he sauntered over to the table at which Ronan was slouched, tossed his hat onto an open chair, and set the drinks down in front of him. Ketchum knocked back his first shot, poured himself another, and hunkered down over it.

"It's just as well he left," the Ranger muttered. "I've got something ta tell ya 'bout, and it ain't fer his ears."

Ronan leaned back and stretched, weary from the long night and the longer day. Ketchum waited until he was done before starting his tale.

"You fought in the War, didn't you, Lynch? Then you know what it's like. Runnin' around, hoping to find someone ta shoot before they shoot you, never knowin' what day's gonna be yer last.

"Sometimes ya almost hope someone'll do ya in just to put an end to it all. At least I 'spect the Yankees fight and die something like Rebs. We're all human, right? Present company excepted, course.

"Anyhow, I was at Gettysburg back in '63. It's a well-worn phrase, but it still seems like only yesterday. I was part of John Bell Hood's division, and we took some pretty heavy casualties on the last day. I was one of them.

"I caught a bullet in my right leg—only a flesh wound, but it was enough to put me down. Once they could manage it, I was put on a stretcher and sent back behind the lines to the division hospital.

"I waited there and prayed the wound wasn't too bad. I just hoped they had enough time to tend to my wound properly instead of just takin' the leg. A lot o' them sawbones were a bit too eager with their hacksaws in them days.

"It was late that night, and the doctors still hadn't gotten to me. It was then I saw the Butcher. At first, I thought he was a doctor. He wore a white coat.

"Before I even saw him, I knew he was coming from the screamin' men he left in his path. I managed to sit up on my cot, and I looked over to see what was happening. The Butcher was working his way down the rows of the injured, taking limbs from men as he went.

"He worked quickly, without any assistants or anesthetic. It was a long moment before I realized he was takin' arms and legs pretty much at random from the fallen, whether the limbs were healthy or not.

"The screams were horrible, but most of the men in the tent had been screaming for hours anyhow. The guards hardly noticed. Most of us were hurt bad and would have been lucky to make it through the night. The Butcher saw to it personally that a lot of us didn't.

"My friends hadn't taken my sidearm when they brought me to the hospital, and I managed to bring my revolver to bear on the creature. I fired a warning shot at him, hoping I—was just seeing things from all the pain. I didn't wanna kill an innocent surgeon.

"He turned on me then, the scalpel he'd been using to dismember those other soldiers still dripping red in his hand. He was on me like a hungry dog on a raw steak.

## INDEPENDENCE DAY

"I screamed for help and emptied the rest of the cylinder into the Butcher, but the bullets just sank into him like I was firin' into the dirt. They had about that much effect.

"The next thing I knew was a horrible pain flashing across my face. The last thing I saw outta my right eye was that damn scalpel blade.

"My shots finally brought the guards, and they burst into the tent expecting to find a Yankee raid. When they saw the Butcher turn toward them, my right eyeball still impaled on the tip of his bloody scalpel, they opened fire.

"I passed out soon after from the pain. The guards ran the Butcher off, but even with more'n a dozen rounds in him, he wasn't slowed in the least. They turned the camp upside down lookin' fer him, but it weren't no use. He was gone."

Ketchum fidgeted in his chair as he realized his glass was dry. He filled it up and topped off Ronan's as well.

"What's this got to do with Dodge?" Ronan asked.

Ketchum continued on like he hadn't heard. "I was discharged from the Confederate Army, but I made my way with the Rangers out West. Ever since then, I've been on this Butcher's trail. Every time it seems I've caught up with him, though, he moves on.

"Maybe I just got lucky to run into Dodge the same time he did, but tomorrow's the Fourth of July, our 13th anniversary to the day. Make no mistake about it. Our killer is the Butcher. I've seen his handiwork too many times before to confuse him with someone else.

"He always attacks near midnight, and he kills three nights in a row before movin' on to the next town. We've got two corpses so far, which means he's outta here after tomorrow night.

"We've got 24 hours to catch this son of a bitch and make him dead." He looked Ronan in the eye with all seriousness and said. "No offense."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ronan wasn't sure if he believed all of Ketchum's story, but the man sure spun a fine tale. The next morning, he stepped into the saloon's main room to see Dog-Eye busy serving drinks to the morning crowd. They were mostly Yankees not about to let any moment of a damn fine holiday go to waste.

When Dog-Eye saw him, his face lit up. "Hey, Lynch, I got something for you."

"What's that?"

"It's Suzy Winger. She's up and around again. The doc gave her something for her nerves yesterday, and she slept right through it without a word. When she got up this morning, she asked for you right away."

"She still in the same room?"

Dog-Eye laughed nervously. "After all o' that? Are you kidding? It's going to take me days of scrubbing just to get the blood off o' the floor."

His voice turned softer then. "Anyhow, that poor kid's never going to want to set foot in that place again. I'm surprised she came back here, but she's got nowhere else to go. She's in room F now, right next to yours."

"Who else you got in this place?"

"Now?"

"At the time of the first murder."

"There was just you, Suzy, and that old drunk Dr. Mansfield. He's been here about a week, and he paid in advance. He's due out of here tomorrow morning."

Ronan touched the brim of his hat as he walked off.

When he got to room F, he knocked on the door. "Come in," a voice beckoned weakly.

Suzy Winger looked up with a grateful grimace. "Deputy, thank God, it's you."

Ronan didn't bother to correct her about his title.

"You wanted to see me, ma'am?"

She smiled weakly. "I understand you saved my life. I'd like to thank you."

Ronan tipped his hat at her. "I was hoping you could answer me a question."

Fear passed across her face for a moment before she squelched it. "I'll try."

"What did the killer looked like?"

She gasped. "Oh, I'll never forget it! He wore a white coat stained with blood, and he had a surgeon's mask over his face. His hair was covered with some kind of white cap, too."

Ronan grimaced at her knowingly. Ketchum had been right on the money.

"When he burst in through the door, I thought we were dead for sure."

That brought Ronan up short. "He didn't come in through the window?"

She nodded fiercely. "There was a knock at the door, and Mr. Goodwin was kind enough to answer it. The next thing I knew, he was hurled back into the room. His head cracked against mine and knocked me senseless for a moment. When I came to—" she steeled herself against the memory. "That butcher was already dismembering Mr. Goodwin and stuffing his parts into an old carpetbag."

Ronan thought about this for a moment. He'd assumed from the attacker had broken into the room from outside. But the glass had been on the ground *outside*. That meant the attacker had to have come in through the door.

Ronan had a good idea where he'd come from.

## CHAPTER 12

Only one other door besides Suzy and Ronan's was locked on the entire hall. Ronan kicked it in without knocking. Clayton Mansfield wasn't there, so the dead man began rooting through the room.

What he found was beyond his worst fears.

The closet had the typical assortment of traveler's things: a chest of clothes, two coats, and—wadded up in a corner—the tattered white shirt Mansfield had ripped to fashion a sling for Walter Jackson. It had blood on it, but it could have been from Walter.

Ronan examined the shirt and found that another patch had been torn out of it. He pulled out of his pocket the scrap of white cloth he'd found dangling from Suzy's window pane the night of the murders. It fit the hole in the shirt exactly.

Then Ronan looked under the bed and found several blood-soaked carpetbags. He dragged them out and dumped their heavy contents onto the bed.

Arms and legs and heads spilled out on to the white linen. A few of the pieces were fresh. Others had mummified with age. None had begun to rot.

Stranger yet, the limbs and heads were stitched together in odd arrangements. Paul Goodwin's lifeless head sat with his arms attached over either ear. His eyes had been sewn open, ensuring they'd never fall shut.

Had he not already tasted Hell for himself, Ronan would surely have run screaming from the room.

Instead he began pawing through the macabre collection. He spotted what he felt sure were Ralphie's limbs, but he recognized none of the others. It didn't matter.

Either way, Ronan knew who he was looking for, and he silently vowed to help Hank Ketchum fulfill his goal of bringing this monster to Ronan's kind of justice: swift, final, and administered personally.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Findin' the Butcher now is easy enough," Ketchum had told Ronan elatedly. The Ranger had been beside himself. The end of his long hunt was in sight. "All we gotta do is sit in his room and wait."

"But what if he figures we've already been there and hightails it the Hell outta Dodge? Besides, he might not return 'til after he kills again."

Ketchum had scowled at that, but it hadn't taken him long to acknowledge that Ronan was right. "But then how can we stop him?"

Ronan had a plan.

The streets of Dodge were crowded that night. Yankees were whooping and hollering all over the place, shooting off their guns and making a general nuisance of themselves. Fireworks paid for by the city bloomed irregularly in the night sky. There had been a few fights with some angry sons of the South, but overall people were behaving themselves nicely.

No one was in the alleys, though, and that's where Ronan was sure the Butcher would strike. This was a cowardly creature, afraid of a fair fight despite its obvious strength. Mansfield hadn't kept his killing spree up for 13 years by being brash.

Still, according to Ketchum, he was going to want a body tonight. Since most people were sticking to the crowds, it was going to be difficult, but there were always a few stragglers that got separated from the herd. It was Ronan's plan to make sure Mansfield chose him over some innocent cowpoke that stumbled into the wrong place at the wrong time.

While Ketchum camped out in Mansfield's room, Ronan canvassed the area, sticking to the alleys and always staying within a block or three of Dog-Eye's saloon. Ronan reasoned that since there were so many people out tonight, the Butcher wasn't likely to roam far from his lair. That would increase the chance of him being spotted, possibly disturbing him in the middle of his work.

As it was approaching midnight, Ronan thought he saw some movement near the outhouse behind Dog-Eye's saloon. He tiptoed out in that direction, holding his breath the entire time. Not needing to breathe made that simple enough, and it helped him stay focused.

As he got closer, he pulled out his Peacemaker and slowly and quietly thumb-cocked the hammer. He reached the corner of the outhouse and swung around it, ready to blast away whatever was on the other side.

The black cat leaped out of the darkness at him. Startled, Ronan plugged the cat in midair, and it spun to the ground, dead before it hit the grass.

Ronan cursed silently.

\* \* \*

Hank Ketchum waited inside Mansfield's room, unwilling to give the Butcher any chance to get away. He was sure the creature wouldn't leave town without collecting his grisly sack of prizes from his past murders. When Mansfield showed up, Ketchum would shoot him dead.

While he sat there on the bed, Ketchum wondered about the bag. Could his own eye actually be in there, mummified after 13 years? He surely hoped not, but he couldn't bring himself to look.

It was then that he heard something rustling underneath the bed.

\* \* \*

Ronan flipped open his cylinder and replaced the bullet he had just fired. He hadn't meant to kill the cat, but he was damned if he was going to feel bad about it. He was damned anyway, so to Hell with the cat.

The whisper that came from behind him before he'd had a chance to holster his gun sent a cold river of fear down his undead spine. "Such a splendid shot you are. Your hands will make a fine addition to my collection."

Ronan whirled around and found himself face to face with the Butcher. He stood over six feet tall, and he wore a black top hat and a coat covered with the blood of dozens of victims. The coat's collar obscured his face, but Ronan was sure who he'd find behind it.

A razor-sharp scalpel glittered in the Butcher's hand. Oversized as it was to fit the creature's monstrous mitt, it would have looked like a Bowie knife in a smaller man's hands.

Physically, the creature was nothing like Mansfield—taller, stronger, faster—but Ronan was still sure it was him. There was dark magic at work here no doubt.

While these thoughts flashed through Ronan's mind, the Butcher waved the scalpel in front between them and then lunged at the gunslinger's no-longer-beating heart.

\* \* \*

Ketchum's heart turned to ice when he heard the noises from under the bed, but he wasn't about to let that stop him. He got down on his knees, grabbed the bedcovers, and flung them aside in one smooth movement.

As he did, a hand shot out and wrapped itself around his throat. Ketchum scrambled backwards, shooting at where a body attached to the arm would be. It wasn't until he was fully up against the door that he realized that the only thing attached directly to the arm choking him to death was Paul Goodwin's laughing head.

As the freakish cranium with the sewn-open eyes cackled over the Ranger's predicament, other extremities pulled themselves from the carpetbag and scabbled their way across the floor to attack Ketchum in whatever way they could. Legs kicked at him, hands climbed up his body to punch and scratch at him, and teeth bit him wherever they could reach.

Overwhelmed, Ketchum fired blindly at the loose heads and limbs. When it became apparent that they'd drag him down and destroy him, Ketchum took the only route left to him.

He charged directly at the window and smashed through it, taking the flailing arms, heads, and legs with him as he fell to the ground below.

\* \* \*

The Butcher's scalpel swung in at Ronan's chest and sliced open his shirt, exposing the dead flesh beneath. Ronan emptied his gun at the creature. The slugs didn't even slow it down.

Ronan dodged another slash. As one harrowed by death, he wasn't easily hurt, but he wasn't sure even he could recover from having his head separated from his shoulders.

The Butcher feinted a low stab and came in with a high cut. The blade caught Ronan's left forearm, cutting it to the bone. No blood oozed from the wound, but it burned like a hot iron.

Ronan hadn't been hurt like that since he'd died, and he'd been stabbed plenty. No normal weapon could have wounded him that way. It was then he finally made the connection.

\* \* \*

When Ketchum hit the ground, his knee smashed into a withered head that had fastened its teeth on his shin. He rolled when he landed, trying to spread as much of the damage from the fall from himself to his horrific attackers.

As he stood up, the unliving limbs held on tight, unfazed by the fall—except for one set. The leg and arm attached to the head he had crushed in his fall lay unmoving on the ground.

He realized that each of the creatures attacking him had at least one head, no matter how many limbs were attached to them. He had wasted a lot of ammo on the arms and legs, when what he should have been going for were the brainpans.

With that thought in his own head, Hank Ketchum set to work.

\* \* \*

Ronan drew his knife from his belt. It was nothing like the Butcher's scalpel, but it was all he was going to need.

The two combatants danced around for a moment. "Come here, Mr. Lynch," wheedled the Butcher in a voice too high for his build. "Let the doctor put an *end* to your *pain*!"

As they circled each other, Ronan stumbled over a rock. The Butcher saw his chance and dove in with his knife, stabbing Ronan straight through the belly until the blade protruded from his back.

Ronan reeled in pain as the mystical blade ran through his side. Still, his plan had come together beautifully. All he needed to do now was stay conscious long enough to pull it off.

As the Butcher cackled triumphantly, Ronan put the hurt to one side. He was dead, and a single belly wound would never be enough to put him down, magic knife or no.

With grim determination, he reached down with his left hand and clutched the Butcher's right arm. With his free hand, he brought his own knife slashing down hard at the Butcher's wrist. It separated neatly from his arm.

Ketchum made quick work of the bodiless things, crushing their skulls one by one. When he was finished, he looked up. He was bleeding from over a dozen cuts and bites, but the job wasn't finished.

In the dimly lit area out back of the Dog-Eye Saloon, he watched as Ronan severed the Butcher's hand.

Before his eyes, the Butcher fell back screaming, blood spouting from his arm's stump like water from a fountain. As he did, he quickly began to transform from the monster in the surgeon's clothes into Clayton Mansfield, the drunken nobody that no one ever paid any mind.

Ketchum kicked in the braincase of the last head near him for good measure and trotted over to the scene. As he walked over, he flipped out his spent cylinder and slapped a fresh one in, an old habit that had saved his life more than once.

When he got there, Mansfield was curled up in a ball, clutching his mangled arm to his chest, and whimpering softly. "It's over," he said. "Thank God, it's finally all over."

Ketchum leaned over and hauled the man to his feet. "You're not gettin' off that easy, pardner. You've killed a lot of good folks, and maimed or not, yer gonna pay."

As Ketchum berated the mass murderer, Ronan reached down and plucked the scalpel from his side. The attached hand fell away and landed in the dirt.

Ronan held the scalpel up to the light to examine it, and he noticed it was engraved with some ancient runes beyond his understanding. As he tried to decipher the sigils, he felt the thing begin to talk to him in a voice that slithered past his ear and right into his brain like some psychic snake. He couldn't help but listen.

"I never meant to hurt anyone," Mansfield whimpered. "It was Dr. Cuttingthwaite, my old mentor. He gave us those blades upon my graduation from medical school—me and my friend Jack. Little did I know that it was my passport to Hell."

"You don't say," sneered Ketchum. "You can tell it to the judge. I know one in Dallas that'll hang you on my word alone, so you won't have to worry none about providing a confession."

"Please," Mansfield gasped, "losing my hand was a small price to pay to be free of that thing. You must destroy it immediately. There's no telling what it might do with the next person who grabs it."

"You don't say," said Ketchum, a note of sarcasm in his voice. As he trailed off, he suddenly sensed a large presence behind him, right where Ronan had been.

He whirled about, drawing his Bowie knife at the same time, and came face to face with a brand-new Butcher, this one wearing the face of Ronan Lynch.

"I was afraid you cheated me outta my revenge, Lynch," Ketchum snarled as he hefted the savage length of Texas steel, "but I'm taking the Butcher out once and for all!"

Ketchum slashed once, twice, slicing Ronan's chest to ribbons. While the dead man growled in amazement at his wounds, Ketchum grabbed the hand bearing the scalpel in his viselike left. "Time to get to the root of the problem,"-he grunted as he brought his blade down like an ax, removing Ronan's hand clean at the wrist.

The new Butcher howled as he fell to the ground, clutching his unbleeding stump, and soon after, Ronan kneeled where the creature had just stood.

"Well," said Ketchum, "this must be my lucky day. I finally catch up with the Butcher, and I bag me an undead gunslinger to boot."

Ronan crawled over, picked up his missing hand, shook the scalpel out of it, and stuffed his loose hand into his pocket. "You're not thinkin' o' takin' me in now that this is over. Even with one hand, I'm more than a match for you, Texas."

Ketchum pulled a well-used rag from a pocket in his coat and scooped the scalpel up in it. "Oh I don't doubt that, Lynch, but I'll never have a better chance."

Before Ketchum could even think about going for his gun, Ronan drew his own pistol with his left hand and leveled it at Ketchum's head. "You'll never have a chance against me," he said flatly.

The Ranger stared down the barrel of the Peacemaker and then into Ronan's long-dead eyes. With a snort and a grimace, he sheathed his blade and pointedly turned his back on Ronan and his gun.

Then he dropped the Butcher's blade down into his breast pocket and looked at it for a moment as if it might explode at any second. "The boys back in Roswell will want a look at this."

He let his jacket fall closed over the pocket and then turned and stared down the barrel of Ronan's Peacemaker again. He patted the scalpel where it sat over his heart. "I think this here's enough of a trophy for one day, don't you?"

Ronan watched Ketchum as he got to his feet. Then the dead man holstered his gun with a short-lived smirk. "You know, Texas, I like how you think."

Off in the distance, sounds of celebrations streamed out from the streets. A grand finale of fireworks lit the night sky to mark the last moments of the day, and the beginning of the Union's next hundred years.

"Besides," growled Ketchum as he dragged the bleeding Dr. Mansfield off into the dark, "I wouldn't want to ruin yer blasted holiday."

"Happy Independence Day, ya damn Yankee."

# INDEPENDENCE





# INDEPENDENCE DAY

## THE ADVENTURE



How'd y'all like that tale o' death? Well, here's your chance to plant the Butcher into the ground yourselves, so grab some dirt here by the fire and let us tell you about the great Independence Day Party of 1876.

### THE STORY SO FAR

Dodge City is throwing a gala celebration to honor the United States' 100th birthday, and all the Yankees in town are as happy as can be. The problem is the Rebels in the area think this particular activity is insulting, seeing as how the United States can't actually lay claim to Kansas and all.

Kansas is smack in the middle of the Disputed Lands, and Kansans are split about

who to support. Both sides, the Union and the Confederacy, have about equal pull, but the town council believes this party to be just what the citizens (and the town coffers) need. So they plan to do it anyway, regardless of whatever might be going on Back East.

The party is set to start July 2 and pick up speed until the big event on the evening of July 4. The town has even hired an outfit from Chicago to light off the biggest fireworks show ever seen. Since the town announced it's decision to launch the celebration, the grumblings have grown louder and more forceful.

One of the councilmen figured out another way for the town to make money. Dodge is selling booths and licenses to different folks so they can sell their own wares, everything



from homemade pies to knives to candles. The council hopes to get the townsfolk and some people from out of town to come in and buy things at the local shops and businesses too. Of course, it wouldn't hurt for the people running the booths to see how well the Kansans work together and decide to set up shop in town permanently.

As the first day of the celebration draws near, the town council has one big collective headache. People are shouting back and forth about the North and the South, the out-of-towners, and even the sins of alcohol. To top it off, Kansas is having an epic heat wave.

In the interest of public safety (and making sure the operation that's going to line their pockets doesn't blow up in their faces), the town leaders have empowered the law in Dodge to deputize trouble-shooters as needed and pay them the whopping sum of \$10 per day to ensure that the town stays quiet for the benefit of all the visitors.

The job of hiring all these deputies has fallen to one man: Wyatt Berry Stapp Earp. He's not happy about it, but at least the council's decided to pay for some extra help instead of expecting him and the rest of the town marshal's crew to handle the celebration's security on their own.

Over and above all of this—unbeknownst to anyone in town—one of the guests is a psychotic serial killer known to a few Eastern newspapers as “the Butcher!” This is the man that wreaked havoc in a Rebel hospital during the battle at Gettysburg back in '63. He's wandered around the continent since and had a long reign of terror. With the heroes' help, that reign might finally come to an end.

## THE SETUP

The opportunity to work with a legend like Wyatt Earp can make or break the reputation of any posse roaming the West. There are a number of ways the heroes can find themselves gainfully employed by the city of Dodge as temporary law enforcers. It's up to you to snare them in the thick of the plot.

## ADS

The city council isn't shy about advertising for help. They've placed notices in the *Dodge City Times* and have posted bills in saloons and general stores throughout the city. Some of them are floating around in areas outside the city, too, so this is a good way to get heroes interested that might be a long ways out of Dodge.

Feel free to throw an ad or two in the heroes' path and see if they bite. If they don't seem particularly interested, you might have a cowpoke grab one of the bills from a wall and start crowing about how he's going to make himself some easy money in the big city this weekend.

Earp's office is pretty easy to find, and folks are happy to steer the heroes in the right direction.

## AN INCIDENT

If the subtle method doesn't work, you can always try something drastic. Set up an incident in Dodge in which the heroes can show how well they can handle a situation.

Tailor the incident to your posse. If they're talkers, have them convince a drunken gunslinger that shooting up a quiet neighborhood isn't the way to make friends. If they like shooting, give them a chance to stop a bungling bank robber in his tracks.

While the heroes are in the process of wrapping up their encounter, Wyatt Earp arrives, beckoned there by the same people who alerted the heroes to the situation. When Earp sees how well the heroes have deported themselves, he offers them each troubleshooter jobs on the spot. They should stop by his office the next day.

## BY REPUTATION

You can always try the direct approach. Have Earp hunt the heroes down and offer them a job.

Earp has somehow heard about the heroes' previous exploits, assuming there are any they should feel proud of. If not, he's misheard something good. If they don't disabuse him of the notion they could be competent deputies, he makes them an offer on the spot. All they've got to do is come by his office tomorrow.

## MAJOR PLAYERS

Several people are smack in the scalpel's path.

## CLAYTON MANSFIELD

Upon graduation from medical school in the Carolinas, Clayton Mansfield's mentor, Dr. Cuttinghwaite, presented him and another student with a small black valise, and the hallmark of surgeons everywhere: a shiny, new scalpel.

Born a Rebel, Clayton offered his services to the Confederate Army. His compatriot, a young doctor named Jack, sailed across the ocean to try his luck in London.

Clayton was working alone in an understaffed Confederate hospital at the Battle of Gettysburg when the Reckon-

ing took place. A surge of mystical energies washed over him and into his tainted scalpel, transforming him from a mild-mannered surgeon into a bloodthirsty killer.

Unfortunately for the soldiers under his care, Clayton's mind was subsumed by the scalpel's will. He began amputating heads and limbs at random, and it was several, long minutes before anyone put an end to his horrific spree.

The killer reappeared the next month, hundreds of miles away. He killed three nights in a row and vanished. This pattern has repeated itself irregularly until this very day.

Clayton is entirely aware of who he's become, but he's helpless to stop it. It tears apart what's left of his conscious, and he drinks constantly to assuage the guilt.

Clayton carries the scalpel with him at all times and often keeps the blade embedded in the skin of his left forearm. He bandages the wound and keeps the shaft taped to the inside of his arm.

This sacrifice temporarily sates the blade's thirst for blood, stretching the time between killings for months, but it never lasts. Eventually, the scalpel sings the music of mayhem, and the doctor must dance like a mad marionette.

Here are Clayton's statistics when he's not possessed.

## PROFILE

**Corporeal:** D:2d8, N:2d10, S:2d8, Q:3d6, V:2d6

Climbin' 1d10, shootin': pistol 2d8, sneak 1d10, swimmin' 2d10

**Mental:** C:3d6, K:4d10, M:2d4, Sm:4d6, Sp: 2d8.

Guts 3d8, language: English 4d10, language: Latin 2d10, medicine: surgery 4d10, search 1d6, streetwise 2d6,

## THE BUTCHER'S SCALPEL

This is a cursed relic of terrible power. It transforms its wielder into a murderer capable of the most horrific deeds.

When the scalpel is in control, it demands midnight killings for three days in a row before letting the host resume control of his body. If possible, the user is to make off with the victim's head and extremities to be fashioned into walkin' heads. The Butcher usually leaves these creatures behind to cause all sorts of trauma in his path and help to cover his tracks.

Once done with a killing spree, the scalpel often does not demand another for a month or more. It knows that it's not an invulnerable device. It's best protection is to keep on the move and not attract too much attention in one place.

# INDEPENDENCE

**Powers:** While transformed into the Butcher (which happens only at night), the user climbs even sheer surfaces at a Pace of 6, walks at 12, and runs at 24. He also gets 3 levels of *sneak*, *dodge* and *fightin':-knife* and adds two steps to each of his Trait dice types. Plus, he can only be harmed by bladed weapons.

The scalpel can create and give orders to up to 10 sets of walkin' heads (see below)-at a time. If the wielder loses the scalpel, the scalpel can control them on its own.

**Taint:** Every time the user holds the blade's bare handle at night, he must make an opposed *Spirit* roll against the scalpel's 4d10 *Spirit*. If he loses, he gains all the powers of the scalpel and falls under the scalpel's control. If he wins, nothing happens.

If the scalpel is picked up by a Harrowed, it struggles for control with whoever is in control of the Harrowed's body at the time: the human mind or the manitou. If the manitou is in charge, draw a card to determine its *Spirit* each time it battles with the blade for supremacy over its host.

Each time the wielder loses the struggle with the scalpel, he's at -1 for any future attempts to fend off the scalpel's attempts at control, up to a maximum penalty of -6.



The scalpel is dormant in the daytime, but not powerless. Once picked up, it cannot be put down voluntarily without getting two or more successes on an opposed *Spirit* roll. When night falls, it tries for dominance again.

If the scalpel is taken from its owner, its power quickly fades. Of course, this isn't as easy as it might sound. The scalpel is small, and the Butcher is strong (called shots to the scalpel are at -9). Severing the hand from the body works as well, but that's a -5 called shot with a blade to even hit the wrist. Anything that snaps the scalpel's blade destroys it forever.

Here's the profile for the scalpel's current host when he's fully under the wicked blade's malevolent control.

## THE BUTCHER

**Corporeal:** D:2d12, N:2d12+2, S:2d12, Q:3d10, V:2d10  
 Climbin' 1d12+2, dodge 3d12+2, fightin': knife 3d12+2, shootin': pistol 2d12, sneak 3d12+2, swimmin' 2d12+2  
**Mental:** C:3d10, K:4d12, M:2d8, Sm:4d10, Sp: 2d12  
 Guts 3d12, language: English 4d12+2, language: Latin 2d12+2, medicine: surgery 4d12+2, search 1d10, streetwise 2d10

**Terror:** 7

**Gear:** Scalpel

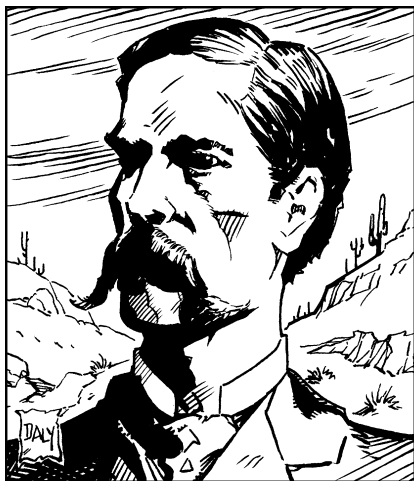
**Special Abilities:**

**Scalpel:** STR+1d8

**Immunity:** Harmed only by edged weapons.

**Control:** Can create and control walkin' heads.

**Weakness:** If the scalpel is lost, he transforms into a battered but grateful Mansfield.



## WATT EARP

Earp isn't the fastest gun in the West, but he's one of the savviest. He's most dangerous because of his fast mind and cool head. He usually buffaloes a troublemaker over the head long before anyone goes for a gun. He's done this so often that people walking around town with bumps on their heads are said to have "earps."

## PROFILE

**Corporeal:** D:3d8, N:2d10, S:3d6, Q:3d8, V:3d8

Climbin' 2d10, dodge 3d10, fightin': brawlin' 6d10, fightin': club 5d10, horse ridin' 3d10, quick draw 4d8, shootin': pistol, rifle. shotgun 5d8, sneak 3d10

**Mental:** C:3d8, K:3d6, M:4d12, Sm:3d8, Sp:2d10

Area knowledge: Kansas 4d6, bluff 3d8, gamblin' 4d8, guts 3d10, leadership 4d12, over-awe 6d12, persuasion 2d12, professional: law 3d6, scruti-nize 5d8, search 4d8, streetwise 4d8, survival 3d8, trackin' 2d8

**Edges:** Levelheaded, luck of the Irish, the voice, the stare.

**Hindrances:** Heroic, obligation (to brothers), pacifist (does not like to kill), stubborn, vengeful.

**Gear:** Buntline, Winchester '73, shotgun, Earp's badge (all attacks against the wearer are

at -4, and he can add +2 to *persuasion* checks, but he loses his highest Fate Chip if he ever denies a cry for help).

## JAKE SIMPKINS

Simpkins is tall with blond hair he wears long and greasy. He poses as the fearless leader of a band of loyal Rebels. (The Wilderness Riders are bandits whose sympathies lie with the South. Many of them are deserters from the Confederate army, who figure they have a better chance of surviving on their own.)

In reality, Jake's a greedy thug who robs any undefended Union banks and trains he can find. Still, he's a ruthless man, so no one has challenged his rule over the Wilderness Riders yet.

Simpkins knows an opportunity when he sees one. When he heard about Dodge's big celebration, he approached the Confederacy with a plan to spoil the Union's party. He named a price to raise a ruckus, and they met it.

## PROFILE

**Corporeal:** D:3d8, N:2d8, S:4d6, Q:3d8, V:2d8  
Climbin' 2d8, dodge 2d8, fightin': brawlin', knife 3d8, horse ridin' 2d8, quick draw 2d8, shootin': pistol 3d8, sneak 1d8

**Mental:** C:4d6, K:2d6, M:3d10, Sm:1d8, Sp: 2d8  
Area knowledge: Kansas 2d6, guts 3d8, leadership 1d10, overawe 3d10, scrutinize 2d6, search 1d6

**Edges:** The voice.

**Hindrances:** Vengeful.

**Gear:** Double-action Peace-maker, Bowie knife, box of 50 shells.

## RALPHIE SIMPKINS

Jake Simpkins made his brother Ralphie his right-hand man because he figured it was safest to keep the psycho as close to him as possible.

Ralphie's a loose cannon, which Jake appreciates. He can let the brash, young hot-head loose on a problem and be sure it'll be reduced to pieces in nothing flat. And if the kid catches the blame for it, then Jake's still in the clear.

Ralphie joined his brother's gang to get paid to hurt people. He preys mostly on the weak or defenseless and takes particular delight in hurting "those damn Yankees" and their cause.

## PROFILE

**Corporeal:** D:3d6, N:3d10, S:3d6, Q:2d8, V:3d6  
Climbin' 2d10, dodge 2d10, fightin': brawlin', knife 4d10, horse ridin' 2d10, quick draw: knife 2d8, shootin': pistol 3d6, sneak 2d10

**Mental:** C:2d6, K:2d6, M:2d8,  
Sm:3d4, Sp: 2d6  
Area knowledge: Kansas 2d6,  
guts 2d6, overawe 2d8,  
search 1d6

**Edges:** The voice

**Hindrances:** Intolerance (really  
hates Yankees).

**Gear:** .44 Army revolver, knife,  
box of 50 shells.

## WALKIN' HEADS

These are a special kind of walkin' dead created by the Butcher. He harvests the heads and limbs from his victims and stitches them into strange configurations, each with a single, mostly intact cranium.

These things crawl along on their disembodied hands and feet, attacking their victims with tooth and nail. The best way to kill them is by planting a bullet between their bloody eyes.

## PROFILE

**Corporeal:** D:2d6, N:2d8, S:3d8,  
Q:2d10, V:2d8

Climbin' 4d8, dodge 2d8,  
fightin': brawlin' 3d8, sneak  
4d8

**Mental:** C:2d8, K:1d6, M:1d6,  
Sm:1d6, Sp:1d4

Overawe 4d6

**Size:** 2

**Terror:** 7

**Special Abilities:**

**Bite:** 3d8

**Scratch:** 3d8

**Undead:** Can only harmed as  
if Harrowed.

## CHAPTER ONE: MEETING THE LEG- END

The posse has been contacted by Wyatt Earp and given directions to his office and instructions to meet him there on the morning of July 2. As charged by the Dodge city council, he's looking for a few good folks to help keep everything under control for Dodge City's centennial celebration.

When the heroes arrive at Earp's office, he asks them to make themselves comfortable. Since there are only two chairs in the place and Earp's in one of them, it should be obvious he doesn't expect them to stay long.

The posse is responsible for keeping the peace in the area between Bridge Street to the east, Third Avenue to the west, Walnut Street to the north, and Front Street to the south. Normally, a single lawman could easily handle this territory, but with the big celebration only a few days off, taking care of this patch of ground has become a big job.

Officially the heroes are only on duty from 6 p.m. until after the festivities end late each night. However, like all good lawmen, they are expected to be on call to lend a hand 24 hours a day. Should this sound



too onerous, Earp points out the heroes are getting a nice chunk of change for what should (hopefully)-be pretty easy work.

Despite Earp's better judgment, the town council hasn't seen fit to ban firearms within the city limits for the duration of the celebration. Tempers are sure to be running as thick as the suds on the beer, and it's only a matter of time—in Wyatt's opinion—before someone draws a pistol in the middle of an innocent little brawl. That's all it takes to turn a fistfight into a killing and put some drunken cowpoke in line for a noose. It's up to the posse to keep that from happening.

The posse can call on Earp or any of the town's other lawmen for backup. However, they shouldn't abuse this privilege.

The biggest problem, Earp believes, is going to be the partisan bickering that's sure to crop up. The Rebs aren't really tickled about anything that makes Union folk happy, and the Yankees are worried that the Confederates are going to try to rain on their parade. Tempers are running hot all over the place and threatening to boil over. It's up to the posse to keep things cool.

Earp offers the heroes each \$10 per day. The job starts now (July 2) and ends at dawn on July 5, or whenever the streets finally happen to clear out.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE BIG CITY

Assuming the heroes take Earp up on his offer, he tells them to vamoose and get to know the area they're responsible for. He'd show them around himself, but he's got enough on his plate.

If they need a place to start, Earp suggests the Dog Eye Saloon. Dog Eye knows Dodge better than about anyone, and he can help out in a pinch.

Let the heroes wander around and acquaint themselves with the area. Toss in a few minor encounters if you like, but keep things light.

### DODGE CITY

Dodge City is a growing community, thriving on its proximity to major buffalo herds and railroads. It's also smack dab in the Disputed Lands, and people in town often have hard feelings about their neighbors. It's not unusual for a person to suffer for their country's sake. Bitterness over politics lies just below the surface of many everyday interactions, and it doesn't take much to boil over.

Everybody in Dodge City is on edge, and just about all of them have an itch they can only scratch with the business end of a Peacemaker. The

posse can expect many little fights in addition to those detailed herein.

Dodge has a Fear Level of 2 on July 2. This is unaffected by the Butcher's first killing. After the second murder, though, folks start figuring things out, and the Fear Level leaps to 3.

If you're interested in finding out more about Dodge, check out the *Deadlands Marshal's Handbook*.

### COWTOWN SALOON

**Description:** This run-down place is so popular with cowpokes that it occupies two adjoining storefronts. The western one is a saloon, but the eastern side houses a number of poker and faro games and pool tables.

**Occupants:** Sally Darsten (proprietor; a weatherbeaten ex-soiled; she's one tough old bird), 1d6 drinkers (3d8 at night), 1d6 gamblers (3d4 at night), and 1d4 ladies.

### DOC SMITH'S OFFICE

**Description:** A low frame building in which the doctor and his young daughter live. They sometimes house patients in the spare room.

**Occupants:** Dr. Zachary Smith (surgeon; a weathered man in his late fifties with a shock of white hair; he

served with the Confederate Army before moving West) and Wilma Smith (Smith's daughter; a pretty redhead; age 11).

## DODGE CITY TIMES

**Description:** The offices of the local newsrag. It's normally only interested in printing "solid" news. This is about to change, since they're at the site of the strangest story of the year.

**Occupants:** Alec T. Fielding (editor; a scarecrow with a nose for news; unfortunately, he's oblivious to the fantastic tale unfolding around him), Sandra Fielding (secretary; a handsome woman in her mid-thirties; Alec's wife), and one or two reporters.

## THE DOG EYE SALOON

**Description:** A solid, frame building. It's a rough place, catering to the tough crowds who don't want to party under the watchful eyes of the town deputies.

**Occupants:** Hank "Dog Eye" McNary (proprietor and bartender; a balding ex-Yankee gone soft; apolitical these days; has a wandering eye), 1d6 barflies (3d6 at night), and Suzy Winger (soiled dove; the most sought-after girl in town; a Union spy).

## FIRST BANK OF DODGE

**Description:** A low stone building, rare in town. It's facade is as solid as its vault, making it a respected bank, even by those thinking about unauthorized withdrawals. Both times it's been robbed, the bank put such a high bounty on the thieves' heads that they were hung within the week.

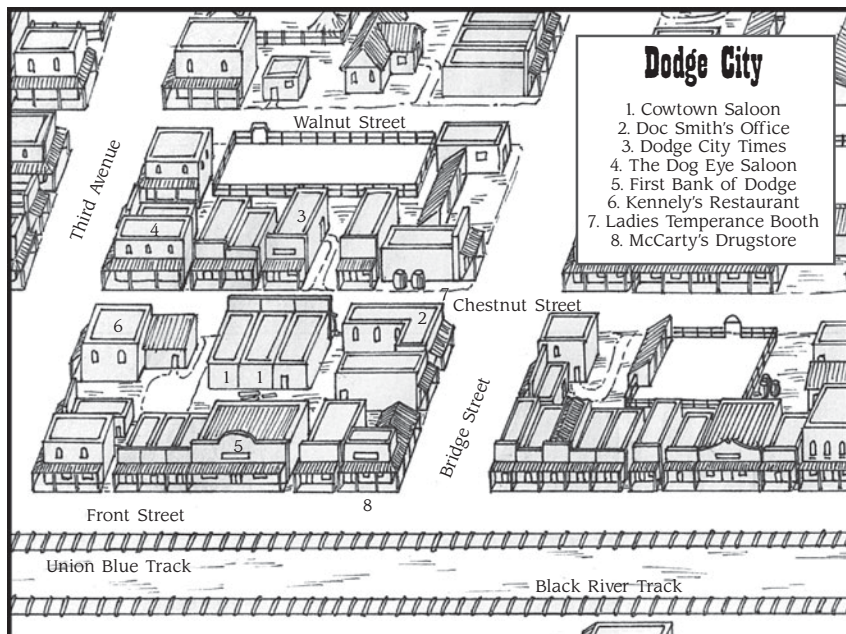
**Occupants:** Jesse Carlton (president; stunning woman in her mid-forties with a no-nonsense attitude toward banking) and 1d4 tellers, depending on the time of day the bank is visited.

## KENNELLY'S RESTAURANT

**Description:** A small place packed with tables, chairs, and people. The kitchen is in the eastern side-building. The decor is like the food: tasteful but plain.

**Occupants:** John Kennelly (proprietor and cook; a burly, curly-haired Irishman with a mean way with a frying pan, both inside the kitchen and out; friendly until crossed; doesn't tolerate fights), Sinead Kennelly (proprietor and hostess; John's wife; a tough Irishwoman who rules the main room with an iron hand), and 3d4 extremely satisfied paying customers.

# INDEPENDENCE



## LADIES TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT BOOTH

**Description:** This booth is well-made and covered with handmade crafts, depicting various Bible scenes. Several signs decry the use of alcohol for any but medicinal purposes.

**Occupants:** Ida Mae Hobart (group leader; steel-haired prohibitionist with a razor-sharp tongue and a thorough knowledge of the Good Book), 16 other women (varying ages but all devoted to their cause), and an occasional husband or suitor.

## MCCARTY'S CITY DRUGSTORE

**Description:** The first floor is a combination drugstore and post office. Dr. McCarty sees patients on the second floor.

**Occupants:** Dr. McCarty (owner, physician, and druggist; a happy and portly man who keeps his list of patients short; he makes more off the store), Janice McCarty (shopkeeper and wife; a sweet-natured brunette who actually runs the shop), and William McCarty (postmaster and son; a chatty youngster with an ear for gossip).

## CHAPTER THREE: A SUNNY DAY

You can run the following encounters in any order that you like. Each of them sets up later events in the plot, so you should cover each of them.

### EVIL SPOTS

As the posse wanders by the Ladies Temperance Movement's booth, a small gray-haired woman introduces herself as Ida Mae Hobart. She is the president of the League's local chapter, and she thinks the entire celebration is an affront to God. There's sure to be alcohol involved, and when people indulge in the devil's drink, they're doing the dark lord's work. Dodge needs saving, and Ida Mae has appointed herself as its savior.

This severe-looking woman in her late fifties has gathered a band of like-minded people to her side, and they plan to take advantage of the crowds to make their feelings known in no uncertain terms. In an uncharacteristic show of civility, Ida Mae has actually coughed up the \$10 to set up her booth. Normally she's happy to simply parade around in her sandwich boards, trumpeting her beliefs at the top of her lungs, but she's going out of her way to seem as reason-

able as possible. To this end, she's printed hundreds of handbills to spread the word.

Ida Mae isn't directly involved with the Butcher, but if you play her right, she can make a nice red herring for suspicious players.

Right now, Ida Mae has decided to size up the trouble-shooters nearest her booth. As is her way, she comes on strong, spoiling for some kind of a fight, almost daring the heroes to cross her.

If she is treated with respect, she launches into a tirade against alcohol. She doesn't care to argue her point. She just wants people to agree. If the heroes do, she loses interest soon enough. Before stomping off she thanks them for their time and their assistance in repressing the unwholesome nature of the celebration as much as can be done. She favors them with a suspicious sidelong glance as she walks away.

If Ida Mae is treated rudely, her face kaleidoscopes through several shades of red before settling on a color closely resembling a boiled beet. She explodes at the heroes at the top of her lungs. In the course of her rant, she lets them know that she considers them willing servants of Satan and the wrath of the Lord is sure to swallow them up with the rest of this forsaken town.

## PARDON ME

A young black man is sprawled across the road, lying among dozens of handbills scattered in the dirt. Ralphie Waters stands over him, daring him to get up and fight.

"C'mon, ya yella Yankee!" he taunts. "Or is talkin' the only thing yer good for?"

Walter Jackson, the man in the street, is an ex-Union soldier from Michigan who has moved to Kansas to persuade the Kansans they should be leaning North. He has put his fighting days behind him and considers himself a pacifist.

Opting to not blow the \$10 on a booth, Walter walks the streets of Dodge, handing out his pro-Union handbills. He was moseying down Chestnut when Ralphie stepped off the boardwalk and knocked him flat. Ralphie claims Walter practically ran him over and the damn Yankee should watch where he's going.

Seeing red, Walter loses his temper, stands up, and socks Ralphie across the jaw. As blood streams from his busted lip, Ralphie pulls a long, thin knife and threatens the young Northerner with it.

If the heroes don't step in, there's going to be a fight, and Walter—who's apologizing for his lack of composure—is likely going to end up dead. Ralphie plans on simply claiming self-

defense (Walter threw the first punch after all).

If the heroes intervene, Ralphie squares off against them. Walter's punch has made him spitting mad and dumb enough to try to stick a deputy. Before he gets his chance, though, Jake Simpkins steps in.

Jake spells it out like this: Ralphie puts his blade away now, or Jake will plant him in the dirt. Embarrassed, Ralphie pleads with Jake for a moment, but it's no use. He buckles in to his leader's demands.

Since there's no harm done, the heroes have no one to toss into jail. As Ralphie walks off, though, he flatly informs the heroes, "This ain't over yet!" If they're Yankees, he curses them and Walter up and down, and if they're Rebels, he calls them traitors to the cause.

## HAVE A DRINK

When the heroes enter Dog Eye's, they're greeted by the owner, who's standing behind the bar. He offers them each a free drink, unabashedly trying to get in good with them. He's talkative, which is more than can be said for the bar's other patrons.

While Dog Eye tries to learn as much as he can about the heroes, Clayton Mansfield stumbles up to the bar and tries to cage a drink from

them. He claims to be waiting for a check to arrive at the First Bank of Dodge on July 5 so he can continue his journey of exploration of the West.

Clayton's already three sheets to the wind, his clothes are tattered, and he stinks from more than whiskey. Still, he's polite and charming. And persistent.

If the heroes refuse him, Clayton thanks them for their time and shoves off toward a table at which he nurses a sip of whiskey out of a dry glass. If they buy him a drink, he lavishes them with thanks.

If the heroes ask Dog Eye, he tells them Clayton staggered into town a few day ago, paid for his room through the fifth, and passed out cold. Dog Eye thinks he came in on the Black River train, but he can't be sure. He's loquacious when awake, which isn't often.

## ALL BUSINESS

As the heroes wander by the alley near Dog Eye's, they come upon a pretty young woman engaged in a heated argument with an older man.

She is Suzy Winger, a saloon gal with an apparent preference for Rebels. In reality, she uses her status as one of the most popular saloon girls in town to gather choice bits of pillow talk to pass on to her masters in the US Army.

Suzy is tall and winsome with long, blonde hair and blue eyes men have sworn they'd die for. Despite all the attentions plied upon her, Suzy refuses to play favorites with her many suitors.

The man Suzy is arguing with is Paul Goodwin. A tall, good-looking man with Eastern clothes and ways, Paul is a spy for the Union army. He passes himself off as a Massachusetts dandy. He pretends to be apolitical, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul makes the rounds of the brothels in Kansas, picking up choice bits of gossip from ladies who listen to the ramblings of the Rebels they bed. They are well-paid for the risks they take on the Union's part.

At the moment, Paul is pressing Suzy to get closer to Jake Simpkins. Paul knows Jake is bound to be up to something during the celebration, and he's afraid it's something big.

Suzy is demanding more money. Jake's a violent man, and if she's going to risk her neck, she wants to be well paid for her efforts.

As the heroes approach, Paul and Suzy spot them. The conversation comes to an abrupt end, and Paul walks off in the opposite direction as Suzy moves to intercept the posse.



Suzy introduces herself as "employee" of the Dog Eye Saloon and suggests the heroes visit her this evening.

If anyone asks about the fight she was having with Paul, she says Paul was a disgruntled customer arguing over the price of her "services." If the heroes catch up with Paul, he spins them a typical tale. He is attracted to Suzy and was merely trying to talk her price down.

On an Onerous (7) *scrutinize* roll, a hero can tell that Paul's hardly telling his whole story. A man that dresses as well as he does should have plenty of money for women like Suzy if he likes. There's little more to know about him, though, without engaging him in a long conversation, something he'd like to avoid.

## BOUNTY POINTS

Action	Points
Find out something about Clayton	1
Avoid Ida Mae's Wrath	1
Rescue Walter	1
Avoid fighting Ralphie	1
Confront Suzy	1

## CHAPTER FOUR: GONE TO PIECES

The first night of the celebration winds down about 11:30. Overall, things have been quiet, and the crowd has been well behaved. Around midnight, the relative peace is shattered by a scream from the second floor of the Dog Eye Saloon.

If the heroes are in the saloon, they can tell where the noise came from. Otherwise, Dog Eye dispatches a cowpoke to bring them running.

There are six rooms on the saloon's upper floor. Suzy's is in the corner farthest from Chestnut and Third. When the heroes burst in, they find Suzy in hysterics, pointing wildly at a man's body on her bed. The sheets are stained red, and if the heroes came running as soon as they heard the scream, blood still spills onto the floor.

The victim is Paul Goodwin, and his head and arms have been severed and are nowhere to be found. This scene requires a Hard (9) *guts* roll.

Paul was meeting with Suzy, when Clayton transformed into the Butcher. The day before, Paul refused to buy Clayton a drink. The Butcher went to make him pay for it.

The Butcher crept from Clayton's room and burst in on the duo. When the door first opened, Suzy and Paul thought a Rebel counterspy had caught up with them, but they soon realized they were wrong.

The Butcher knocked Suzy senseless with a single blow and cut Paul's throat just as quick. Suzy regained her senses as the Butcher stuffed Paul's head and arms into a carpetbag. At the sound of her scream, the Butcher fled, crashing through the window to the alley below.

Of course, the heroes don't know any of this, and Suzy's too far gone. Still, there are some clues.

Suzy didn't lock her door after Paul came in, so there's no sign of forced entry. Smart players may notice there's no broken glass inside the room, indicating the Butcher left instead of entered that way. Since the only other means of entry is the door, they should figure that's how he got in.

No one downstairs recalls anyone strange coming up at any point. One theory is the killer entered by the back stairwell at one end of the second floor. In actuality, Clayton

didn't leave his room all day while he struggled with the scalpel, but no one has any way of knowing that.

If a hero wants to *search* the body itself for clues, consult the Forensic Evidence Table for the results.

A doctor may use her *medicine* Aptitude instead of her *search* on the table below. If so, add +2 to her roll.

## FORENSIC EVIDENCE

Roll	Result
5	The killer used a very sharp blade.
7	The killer was strong.
9	The killer used a shallow blade.
11	The killer has some knowledge of human anatomy.

A Hard (9) *search* of the area turns up a torn piece of fabric fluttering from the window pane. It is a patch of white silk (torn from Clayton's shirt).

A Fair (5) *search* of Paul's body turns up a letter sewn into the lining of his vest. It reveals him to be a Union spy, and it requests all citizens of the United States to extend him every courtesy.

Some heroes may try to track the killer from his landing spot outside the window. The trail is fairly clear, requiring only a Fair (5) *trackin'* roll to follow. An Onerous (7)

*trackin'* roll reveals that the killer walked away without a limp, despite leaping out of a second-story window. The trail goes east behind the buildings before turning south around the offices of the *Dodge City Times*. There it disappears into the well-trodden road.

## BOUNTY POINTS

### Action

Discover a Fair or  
Onerous clue  
Discover a Hard or  
Incredible clue

### Points

1

2

## CHAPTER FIVE: MORE TROUBLE

Soon after the murder (whenever you feel it's dramatically appropriate), a roar goes up in the street out in front of Dog Eye's. When the heroes arrive on the scene, they find a crowd of revelers (unaware of the killing that happened only moments ago) standing in a large circle, cheering on a brawl. As the heroes push through the throng, they find Ralphie Waters laying into Walter Jackson. Ralphie stomps down on Walter's arm, breaking it with a sickening crunch.

If the heroes do nothing, Ralphie beats Walter within an inch of his life, then spits on his unconscious body, and saunters into the saloon to get himself a post-fight drink.

If the heroes intervene, they can easily separate the two, but Ralphie's not quite ready to call it quits. He takes a swing at the toughest looking hero.

As the heroes get ready to show Ralphie the error of his ways, a shot rings out. The crowd parts to reveal Jake Simpkins and a bunch of Wilderness Riders (one for every hero present, in addition to Jake and Ralphie). Jake holsters his smoking gun and yells out, "Put the boy down, deputies. He was only defendin' himself against that there trouble-maker."

Ralphie freezes in his tracks. A few of the Riders rest their hands on their pistols, ready for a fight. None of them draw first, but they want to make sure the heroes think hard before going for their guns.

Jake explains to the posse that he and his men were just minding their own business when Walter burst into the saloon and began calling them names. Ralphie called him out into the street to teach him a lesson in manners. As Jake speaks, he glares at each of the onlookers in turn, daring them to contradict him. None of them even meet his eyes.

While the posse and the Wilderness Riders are engaged in a staredown, Clayton staggers through the crowd, lurches over to Walter, and kneels beside him. With a smooth, prac-

ticed move, Clayton grabs Walter's broken arm and sets it. When Walter's scream of agony dies, Clayton stands and mutters "broken arm, needed setting" in an Eastern accent. Then he draws himself up to his full height, belches loudly in a hero's face, and grins like a canary-eating cat.

Meanwhile, Ida Mae storms out of the crowd and contradicts Jake's story, painting him as the blatant liar he is. Walter was strolling quietly along the street when the Wilderness Riders accosted him. He tried to avoid them and refused to raise a hand to defend himself, turning the other cheek, but Ralphie beat him senseless for it.

As Ida Mae finishes her account, Ralphie steps up to her, cursing her for a liar. He gives her a little shove, and she stumbles backward into Clayton, knocking them both into a nearby horse trough.

While the ensuing laughter may break the tension for the moment, it doesn't take long for it to return. Jake steps forward and challenges the heroes. "It's her word against ours, deputies," he says as he moves his hand to his pistol's grip. "What's it gonna be?"

Before any shots are fired (hopefully), Wyatt Earp shows up, letting loose with his guns to get everyone's attention. "You all better get your hides outta here," he roars. "There's



been a killing, and I don't have the time to referee this little boxing match."

At the news of the murder, Ralphie's face blanches. "He ain't dead, deputy," he says, pointing at Walter. "He's just bleedin'."

Wyatt sneers at the ruffian while explaining he was referring to a death inside the saloon. With this, he gives the heroes a hard look and states flatly, "Whenever you folks are through playing patty cake with the Rebs, we've got us a murder to solve."

Jake's not ready to tangle with Wyatt or the regular Dodge police force, so he orders his men to back down. As he turns to leave, he hits the heroes with a parting shot. "I'm glad the real law showed up to calm things down. I sure didn't want to have to go to court to defend shooting you."

Since the heroes have already looked over the crime scene, Wyatt suggests they get some sleep and report to his office at 10 o' clock that morning. He's off to cast a fresh eye over it all.

## BOUNTY POINTS

Action	Points
Rescue Walter	1
Face down Ralphie	1
Face up to the Wilderness Riders	1
Avoid getting hurt	2

## CHAPTER SIX: THE MORNING AFTER

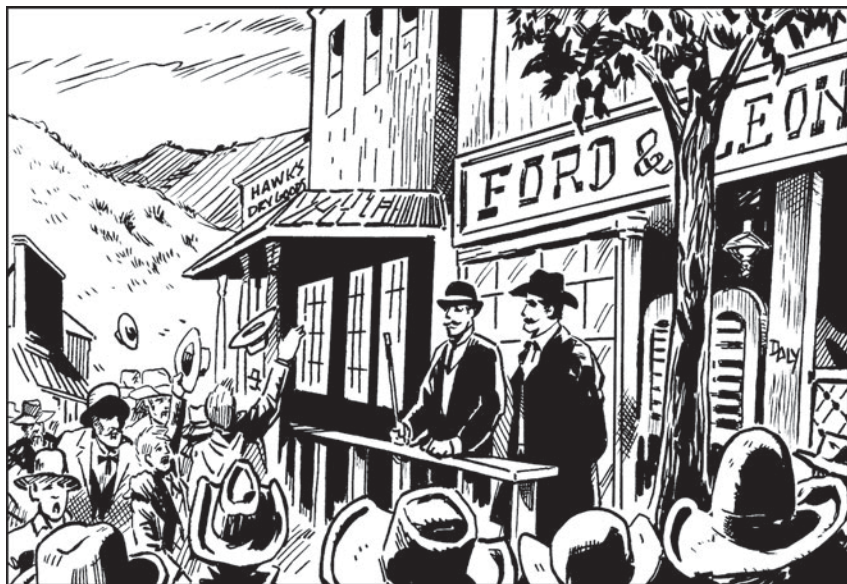
The second day of the celebration promises to be worse than the first. If the heroes don't make it to Wyatt's office by 10 o' clock, he sends a boy to look for them. The message is quite clear: show up to get chewed out by Wyatt, or show up to turn in your badges and then get chewed out by Wyatt. Either way, show up.

Wyatt makes it clear he's not pleased with the heroes' performance. He understands how they dealt with the murder. There wasn't much they could have done to stop that.

He's irritated that they let themselves get drawn into a confrontation with the Wilderness Riders. Those ruffians are just itching for a chance to make Dodge look bad, and a big shootout would certainly fit the bill.

Still, that's water under the bridge. The murder is the main concern. Wyatt informs the heroes that Goodwin was a spy for the Union army, and a good one. Wyatt has known Goodwin for several months, and he considered him to be the best kind of spy a deputy could want: discreet.

Given the nature of the crime, it was obviously not



a simple robbery, despite the fact Goodwin's pockets had been emptied (Clayton is honestly desperate for money). Wyatt wants the heroes to make some discreet inquiries, but they are not to discuss the style of the killing with anyone. The last thing Dodge needs now is a panic.

If the heroes can find the killer quickly, Wyatt promises they'll see a fat bonus. In the meantime, they shouldn't forget about doing the job they were hired for: keeping the peace.

## THE INVESTIGATION

At this point, the posse has several avenues of inquiry available to them.

## THE OTHER VICTIM

Suzy is resting at Doc Smith's office. The doctor insists she's not in any condition to be answering any kind of questions, but if the heroes are persistent, he relents.

In any case, the doctor's not far wrong about his charge. She's still bordering on the hysterical, and at the first mention of Paul, Dog Eye's, or anything remotely resembling the incident of the previous night, she begins sobbing uncontrollably. At this point, the doctor vehemently asks the heroes to leave. Suzy's not going to be of any help to them today. They should stop by tomorrow.

If the heroes are abrupt with the doctor, he's short with them as well. However, if they treat him with some respect (or if they flat out ask him), he is willing to discuss the condition of Paul's corpse.

Doc Smith knows all of the clues about Paul's body, and he's ready to share them all. The only other thing he knows is that Suzy keeps mumbling about a monster, but that's as coherent as she ever gets.

### THE PATCH OF SILK

McCarty's Drugstore is the main source in town for cloth and such. If the posse finds the scrap of cloth on the window pane and takes it to the drugstore, McCarty identifies the material as silk, and a good brand at that. A shirt made out of the cloth would be expensive and probably only available through some of the shops back East. This clue is worth one Bounty Point.

### JUST ANOTHER DAY

The crowds of people at tonight's festivities seem less jovial and a little more anxious. People keep looking over their shoulders, and tempers flare frequently. Now's a good time to toss in a few random encounters to keep things moving. Here are a few to get you started.

### THE RUMOR MILL

An argument between Ida Mae and some of the celebrants breaks out. She heard about the murder through the grapevine and claims a Union supporter did the knifing. Darius Clay, a cowpoke in the crowd, took offense to this slander. If the players don't intervene quickly, this could escalate into quite a brouhaha.

### A SON'S LOVE

A small scuffle breaks out on the sidewalk. It seems a Wilderness Rider (a young man named Wilson) said some rather rude things about a townie's love for his mother. The man decided to take exception to the comments and carve his answer to the rude questions on Wilson's hairy chest.

### A WORD OF THANKS

Later in the evening, Walter stops by and thanks the heroes for saving his life last night. No matter what Deputy Earp might say, the posse is all right in his book.

Walter reveals that he's seriously reconsidering his renunciation of violence. To that end, he's bought himself a knife. He demonstrates its sharpness by shaving some hairs off his arm. "Next time," he says, "I'll be ready."

Of course, he won't be using it with his busted arm. Luckily he's right-handed and Ralphie broke his left arm. "That guy sure did a good job setting it, too," he notes. "Doc Smith was really impressed."

If the heroes go looking for the good Samaritan, though, Clayton's nowhere to be found. Dog Eye says he thinks he stumbled up to his room to sleep it off, but someone else speaks up saying he thought he saw Clayton on the street.

## BOUNTY POINTS

Action	Points
Learned something new from Doc Smith	1
Have McCarty identify the silk	1
Keep Ida Mae from starting a fight	1
Prevent the fight with Wilson	1

## CHAPTER SEVEN: MORE DEATH

Around midnight, the heroes hear a shout from out back of Dog Eye's that quickly grows into a loud commotion. When they arrive on the scene, a small crowd has already begun to gather. Off to one side a man leans against the side of a nearby outhouse, loudly vomiting. Whoever it was that beat him to the privy is nearly as vocal.

The throng forces the posse to struggle to get to the body. Once there, the heroes discover that the killer has struck again, this time taking the victim's legs instead. With a Hard (9) *Cognition* roll, a hero can recognize Ralphie from what little is left of him.

Just after the posse arrives, Jake Simpkins and a few of the Wilderness Riders show up. Simpkins immediately accuses unknown Union sympathizers of the crime.

One of the Riders suggests that it's all a plot to discredit the South, perpetrated by the Union. This gets some strong reaction from the crowd, some of whom are ex-Union Army, and two groups of men start squaring off. The metallic glint of knives shines in the moonlight. The tension mounts, and it's again up to the posse to stop it before things get ugly.

You should use your discretion with regards to how the crowd's going to feel about whatever explanation the heroes offer, but the Yankees would not react well to news that the first victim was a Union spy. The Rebels would likely feel even worse if they were to learn that Suzy was an informant to such a man.

Hopefully the heroes can defuse the matter. Otherwise, there's sure to be a lot more blood spilled on this already crimson ground.

# INDEPENDENCE



One way or another, Earp arrives after the matter is resolved (or just in the nick of time if the heroes need a hand). He disperses what's left of the crowd, congratulates the posse if no blood was spilled, and then orders the body carted off to the doctor's. He then takes the heroes aside and tells them that whoever did this must be caught. Now that the killings have been made public, another body could blow the lid off the town.

## BOUNTY POINTS

### Action

Each new clue from

forensic evidence 1

Defuse the potential riot 2

### Points

## CHAPTER EIGHT: INDEPENDENCE DAY

Bright and early the next morning (July 4), Wilma Smith knocks on the door of one of the heroes' rooms. Her father wants to see the deputies right away. He's got something to tell them about the murders.

## DR. SMITH'S OFFICE

When the heroes arrive at the doctor's office, he greets them in the reception room. With a sigh, he seats himself

in a plush chair and motions the heroes to find seats for themselves. He starts off by explaining that Suzy is still incoherent, but he's got something else to say. Then he begins his story.

"Back in '63, I served in the Confederate Army as a surgeon. During the Battle of Gettysburg, I was stationed in a field hospital, and the wounded were coming in thick and heavy.

"I was stitching together some poor young man's arm when I heard a tremendous commotion from the triage tent where other men were waiting for our attention—or were long past needing it. It was a hot night, kind of like it'll be tonight, and although it was 10 years ago to the day, I remember it like it was only last week.

"I handed my needle to my nurse and trotted out to see what the hullabaloo was about. At first I thought the Yankees had outflanked us and were attacking us in the night. It turned out to be worse—much worse.

"Apparently some butcher in surgeon's clothing had been working his way among the wounded, amputating healthy limbs as he went. No anaesthetic. No bullet to bite on. Just a quick cut with the knife, and the arm or the leg was gone. In some cases, he took heads.

"There was one man by the name of Ketchum who spotted him. Ketchum was near to death himself, but he'd been awakened from his delirium by the screams of those the Butcher was dismembering. The soldiers standing guard outside the tent had ignored the yells. After a while of listening to wounded men scream, knowing you can't do a thing about it, you just try to shut it out.

"Anyhow, Ketchum managed to reach his sidearm and plug the Butcher full of lead. The gunshots were what finally got the guards to come running.

"When the soldiers arrived, they saw the Butcher standing over Ketchum, who was still firing his empty pistol at the killer despite the fact that his right eye was impaled on the tip of the Butcher's bloody scalpel. With an insane cackle, the madman ran off, despite the fact the guards swore they'd hit him with their rifles as he fled.

"Now I don't know if it means anything or not, but these murders here in town sure do remind me of that night. I've inspected the bodies here in Dodge, and the wounds are almost identical to those suffered by the soldiers massacred in their beds at Gettysburg. If the Butcher's here, we're in for a heap of trouble. "

## BACK ON THE JOB

After the harrowing tale spun by Dr. Smith, the heroes return to duty with a fresh set of worries. Rumors about the killings are circling around like vultures in the sky. Tensions were already high, and as the day fades into night, fights break out all over town. Many of the townspeople can be heard to mutter oaths against the Union, the South, and any other group they don't like.

At one point, Wyatt wanders by, hand on his gun, catching the eyes of the more surly men. This calms things down for a moment, but soon after he saunters on, the people are sniping at each other again.

Just as the sun slides down past the horizon, a boy from Dog-Eye's rushes up and breathlessly pants out that Suzy Winger (who's now back at the saloon)-has recovered enough to start talking about her experience the other night.

## THE WITNESS

Dog Eye shows the heroes into room F (Paul was killed in room C)-where Suzy is recuperating. She greets them weakly, recognizing them as the deputies who spotted her talking with Paul in the alley the day of the killing. It takes her a moment until she launches into her account.

"Paul had insisted in coming up to my room. Normally he preferred to meet me in the alley out back, but after our run-in with you that day, he was afraid we'd be spotted. He came up the back stairs, which creak horribly, so I was ready for him when he arrived.

"We were talking quietly when the monster burst in. I didn't even hear him coming. It was a complete surprise.

"Paul hadn't locked the door behind him. Normally I do that myself, but since he only wanted to talk, I hadn't bothered. Not that I think it would have done a bit of good.

"He was tall and slim, but I didn't get a good look at his face. All I remember was the way his eyes glared out at me from beneath the brim of his black top hat. Then he hit me across the face," Suzy motions at her battered lips, "and I blacked out.

"When I came to, I saw the Butcher—that's what Doctor Smith calls him. He was standing over Paul, stuffing his head into a bag. I just started screaming. I didn't know what else to do.

"He turned to glare at me again, and then he leapt right through my window like he was walking through a door. That's the last I remember until this morning. Doctor Smith tells me I was out of my head."

Hopefully the heroes have got the last clue they need here. Suzy didn't hear the Butcher coming up the back stairs because he was already in the building. All he did was walk from Clayton's room over to hers.

## BOUNTY POINTS

### Action

### Points

Figure out the Butcher is staying at Dog Eye's 2

## CHAPTER NINE: THE MADMAN'S LAIR

To get to this point, the heroes need to put several things together. A cautious posse might not think to investigate Clayton's room until they're absolutely sure what's going on. Other heroes might start knocking down doors right after the first killing.

No matter. When the heroes start poking around Clayton's room, they've set the plot on a non-stop freight train hurtling straight into hell.

Clayton's room lies at the far end of the hallway from Suzy's place at the Dog Eye Saloon. The door is locked, but the lock is cheap, needing only a Fair (5) *lockpickin'* attempt to open it. If Dog Eye is along, he's ready with the key. As he opens the door, he notes that

he hasn't been in to make the place up since Clayton moved in.

Inside, the place is immaculately kept. A steamer trunk sits in the closet, emptied of its contents. The bed is sharply made, and the clothes are hung neatly in the closet. Two or three white silk shirts hang in a corner. They are all as tattered as the one that Clayton normally wears.

Further investigation yields several important discoveries. Under the bed, there are a number of carpetbags and a black doctor's valise. Inside, there are a number of surgeon's tools and a small, black carrying case. The case is empty, but the impression inside it seems to be that of a scalpel. There is a bloodstain on the velvet lining of the case.

The carpetbags are filled with human heads and limbs in various stages of decay, although the older ones have been "pickled" and smell of formaldehyde. They are stitched together in illogical formations, each centered around a cranium. When first confronting this terrible collection of body parts, each hero must make an Onerous (7) *guts* check.

While there's absolutely nothing to imply it right now, these grotesque human conglomerations are actually

walkin' heads. Suspicious heroes might try to destroy the things right now. If they do, the walkin' heads certainly do their best to defend themselves. Otherwise, without orders from the scalpel's owner (which they don't have right now), they are inactive.

## BOUNTY POINTS

Action	Points
Identify the Butcher	2
Discover the body parts	1

## CHAPTER TEN: THE GRAND F- NALE

At this point, the posse should be on the lookout for Clayton Mansfield. Unfortunately for them, the Butcher has a watchful eye on them too. From a rooftop vantage point, he saw them enter his room, and he knows that they have gotten too close.

However, the Butcher is a cunning creature, preferring to attack when his foes are at their collective weakest, so he waits to see if they split up. If so, he follows the most dangerous person in the group and begins taking the posse out one by one, until there are none left. If the posse stays together, he employs hit-and-run tactics, whittling away at the heroes bit by bit. Since the

Butcher has no ranged attacks, he stays in the heart of the city, keeping to the alleys and buildings as much as possible.

The Butcher uses his unique talents to utmost advantage, striking quickly, from above where possible, then disappearing into the shadows to strike again. This can go on for several hours until the posse finally corners him.

If the Butcher senses weakness in his opponents, he grows more bold as the night wears on. In the midst of this brutal cat-and-mouse game, the fireworks begin going off. The flashes of illumination from these fiery toys are all that the posse has to go by, and they cast eerie shadows across the alleyways. The Butcher uses the flashes to his advantage, skipping from shadow to shadow, striking when the posse's back is turned.

If necessary, the Butcher summons some of his servants to help him. The walkin' heads rush forward from the darkness, attacking the posse from all sides. During the strange creatures' first onslaught, the heroes each must make an Onerous (7) *guts* roll.

The key to defeating the Butcher without a very dangerous toe-to-toe battle is taking his scalpel. It is the source of his supernatural power, and taking it from him robs him of his abilities.

## INDEPENDENCE

The most straightforward method of removing the scalpel from the Butcher's possession is to knock it from his hand with a called shot. Due to the target's small size and the Butcher's strength, such shots suffer a -9 penalty.

Alternatively the posse may try removing the Butcher's hand from his body. This requires a sharp and preferably large and heavy blade like a Bowie knife or an ax. This is also a called shot with a -5 penalty, and a serious wound is needed to remove the hand in one blow (maiming over several hits works too). Other methods may work, but that's up to you.

When the Butcher loses the scalpel or is killed, he reverts to Clayton. If he's still alive, Clayton begs for mercy at the heroes' hands. He knows the Butcher deserves death, but Clayton is as much a victim as anyone else here. It's the scalpel that's evil, not him.

Even after the Butcher is gone, the walkin' heads (if any are left) fight on. They don't have much in the way of tactics anymore. They just keep on attacking until they either win or are dead.

## THE AFTERMATH

This mission can end in several ways for the posse. The first, and least pleasant, is



that the Butcher wins. If he does, too bad. Nobody said life in the Weird West was easy. Maybe death will be a little easier.

# INDEPENDENCE

Or the posse might dispatch the Butcher to the Great Beyond. If killed, he reverts back to Clayton Mansfield. If this happens, and the posse does not figure out the significance of the scalpel, the cursed relic may somehow manage to find another damaged soul (one of the posse!) to wield it on another bloody killing spree.

## BOUNTY POINTS

Action	Points
Defeat the Butcher	5
Defeat the Butcher after only a single killing	+2
Figure out the scalpel's secret	+1
Destroy the scalpel	+1
Save Clayton Mansfield	+2

## BOOT HILL

### JAKE SIMPKINS

#### Attack:

Bowie Knife 3d8/3d8+1d6  
Pistol 3d8/3d6

#### Defense:

Brawlin' 3  
Dodge 2  
Bowie Knife +1

**Hits:** 30

### TOWNSFOLK

#### Attack:

Fist 2d6/2d6  
Small Club 2d6/2d6+1d4  
Gun 2d6/3d6

#### Defense:

Brawlin' 1

**Hits:** 30

### WALKIN' HEAD

#### Attack:

Bite 3d8/3d8  
Fist 3d8/3d8

#### Defense:

Dodge 2

**Size:** 4

**Terror:** 7

#### Special Abilities:

**Undead:** Can only be harmed as if they were Harrowed.

### RALPHIE WATERS

#### Attack:

Knife 4d10/4d6+1d4  
Pistol 3d6/3d6

#### Defense:

Brawlin' 4  
Dodge 2  
Knife +1

**Hits:** 30

### WILDERNESS RIDERS

#### Attack:

Knife 3d6/3d6  
Pistol 3d6/3d6

#### Defense:

Brawlin' 1  
Dodge 1  
Knife +1

**Hits:** 30