



HORROR FOR THE HOLIDAYS



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Owen's Dedication: Special thanks to Tui Snider, whose book inspired this adventure.

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Happy Holidays!

The Christmas spirit has descended upon Pinebox. It's a time for celebration, a time for relaxation, and perhaps a time when the forces of darkness would give the world some gosh darned peace and quiet.

Unfortunately, this year the Christmas spirit is an actual spirit—and it doesn't care if you've been naughty or nice. The spirit of the last man to be publicly lynched in Texas has risen, and he's on the tail of a young Freshman at ETU.

Oh. And he looks like Santa Claus.

Just a little note before we get started, Dean. In this adventure the study group likely needs the Grave Speak ritual. If you don't want them learning this ritual yet, then you'll want to save this tale for later.

BACKGROUND

On December 23rd, 1927 a man named Marshal Ratliff and four accomplices tried to rob the First National Bank in Pinebox. Fearing he might get recognized, Ratliff disguised himself with a Santa Claus costume. While Ratliff and three men went in to rob the bank, his fourth accomplice, a woman named Josephine Herron, kept watch outside.

Unfortunately for the robbers, Josephine's fifteen year old daughter, Marion, was also downtown. Upon exiting a store with a small amber brooch she planned to give to her mother, Marion spotted both her mother

and the robbery taking place in the large glass window behind her. Not knowing of her mother's involvement, Marion ran straight to the police chief—George Emory 'Bit' Bedford.

At the time, banks across the country offered a \$5,000 bounty on the lives of anyone killed while committing a robbery. Word got out the bank was being robbed and soon every local hot-head with a gun descended upon the scene. Seeing this, Josephine left her post, found Marion, and fled. The resulting firefight left two people dead, including Police Chief 'Bit' Bedford himself. After a massive, two-day manhunt all four robbers were caught. Not only was Josephine Herron never arrested, but her daughter Marion ended up being the key witness who sent the robbers to the executioner. At the trial she even wore the amber brooch she'd bought for her mother the day of the robbery.

Two years later, while Ratliff was awaiting execution in Eastland, Texas, he killed one of the jailers and almost succeeded in escape. However, townsfolk heard the ruckus and caught him outside the building. The angry mob decided to take matters into their own hands and at 9:55 pm on November 19th 1929, Ratliff became the last person in Texas history to be publicly lynched. In his last breath he swore vengeance on the little girl whose testimony sealed his fate.

One might be forgiven for scoffing at the promise of a man about to dangle at the end of a rope, especially since



Marion lived her life without incident. However, Ratliff meant what he said. Some curses just take longer than others.

NOT LONG AGO

A few years ago a young girl named Sarah Herron celebrated her fifteenth birthday in Eastland, Texas. For her birthday, her parents gave her an amber brooch passed down by the women in the family. As soon as she pinned it on herself, Ratliff's angry spirit awoke. Only vaguely aware of the passage of time, Ratliff mistook the girl for Marion and used his death vow to rip through to the material world. In Sarah's home the revenant willed a new, undead, body into existence and summoned his former accomplices around him once more.

One of these accomplices, Louis Davis, tried to warn her. Davis had always been affectionate towards Marion. He had planned to give his share of the robbery to her mother before it went so badly wrong. In the spirit's first moments

returning to the world he shouted "Marion! Run!" before losing control to Ratliff's will.

Sarah ran and hid. Her parents died trying to protect her. The police came in time to rescue Sarah and defeated the undead murderers. The official file says Sarah's parents were attacked by 'persons unknown during a breaking and entering'. Sarah survived the night, meaning Ratcliff's death oath remained unfulfilled. The following year between December 23rd and Christmas day itself, the bandits returned again to try to kill Marion's descendant. And again the year after that.

The resilient young woman learned to survive and even fight back. This year Sarah is a Freshman at ETU. Since she's arrived she has had her eye on a particular study group. Maybe they can help her find answers and finally stop the killer Santa once and for all.

WRECK THE HALLS

Every year the university puts on a special holiday meal for students who, for whatever reason, are not able to return home. This year, the study group is among them.

There can be many reasons why the students don't go home this December. Flights get grounded by awful weather and icy runways. A student's family is going through personal problems and there simply isn't a place for them this year. Local students can, of course, just attend the dinner to be with their stranded friends.

If you are running the *Degrees of Horror* plot point campaign, a good opportunity for this adventure follows almost directly after the Grand Haunt plot point in the Sophomore year. The reason the students cannot return home for the holidays is to comply with the cover story for the event. According to the official report, they are under local quarantine following their exposure to the "unknown chemicals" released into the lab. The authorities could offer a small incentive for them to comply, or if the students refuse

then they might adopt a more threatening approach.

Ultimately, it's something to mediate with your players. Work with them to come up with reasons why their characters are on campus for the holiday celebrations.

AN INVITATION

The students receive an invitation to an ETU holiday meal. Students in Pinebox receive it through the mail, while those living on campus get it delivered in person by a volunteer, James Park. James is a Sophomore student with dyed green hair, a happy grin, and a different geeky T-shirt every day. Most people wouldn't believe he's a Criminal Justice major or that he's volunteering at the Sheriff's department.

- **James Park:** Use the Student profile in *East Texas University*.

The letter reads (and a handout is provided on page 18):

Dear Student,

We would like to invite you to celebrate a holiday meal in the Student Center at 7 pm on the 23rd of this month. While many students are unable to be with their families at this time of year, it would be our pleasure if you would celebrate the occasion with us — your academic family.

Should you wish to attend, please dress in business-casual attire, or if you prefer, in holiday fancy dress.

Looking forward to seeing you there,

President James Nelson

THE HOLIDAY FEAST

When the students check in at the banquet hall entrance, they find the room laid out such that the food is provided in a buffet table in the center, with circular tables surrounding it. Guests have been assigned seating, with the study group seated together at table 8. Anyone paying close attention to the guest list notices two other names for their table, Sue Tindir and Sarah Herron.

At table 8, both Sarah and Sue are already seated. Sue, a Pinebox native, is a dark haired Sophomore wearing a black dress and a red beret. Her table-mate, Sarah, is a blonde Freshman in jeans and a winter jacket.

A CONVENIENT EXAMINATION

As the adventure is set during the winter holidays, there's a good chance your study group takes their exams right before the adventure starts. Those outcomes might give you a chance to seed the adventure, such as by establishing a connection (or romantic date) with a deputy at the Sheriff's office or local historian Sue Tindir.

As the study group arrives Sue is trying to make conversation by telling her table companion about the Burn, but Sarah clearly is not listening. She seems nearly panicked, breathing like an Olympic sprinter preparing to race. Anyone who succeeds on a Notice roll spots Sarah scanning the room and glancing nervously at each person who enters. A Raise spots a small handgun concealed in her jacket.

- ★ **Sarah Herron:** Use the profile on page 17. She is armed with a Ruger handgun (Range 10/20/40, Damage 2d6-1, ROF 1, Shots 9, Semi-Auto)

- **Sue Tindir:** Use the Student profile in *East Texas University*. Add Knowledge (Pinebox) d6.

Sue starts as Friendly on the Reaction Table. She's a very social person and considers herself a local historian. She's all too happy to make conversation about local Christmas traditions, historical factoids, and even the odd supernatural rumor. This dinner makes a good opportunity for some light foreshadowing for the rest of your campaign.

While Sue chats with the group, Sarah continues to act anxious. She wants to have a word with the study group but not where anyone else can overhear. In fact, it's not mere coincidence Sarah is at the same table as the study group. She requested they be put at a table together after having caught rumor of their exploits. Sarah wants the amateur investigators to see Ratliff manifest so they believe her, although she hopes to talk to the study group and lead them somewhere less crowded first.



HERE COMES SANTA CLAUS

Allow the group plenty of time to socialize, talk to other dinner attendees, and so on. You may even weave in a scene relevant to another Savage Tale or generated adventure. After the students have settled in and gotten something to eat, read the following.

As the meal winds down and other tables begin emptying, Sarah leans over and says in a hushed voice, "We have to talk. Now. Every second I'm here I'm putting lives in danger. I shouldn't have come but... look. I've heard of y'all. I know you've seen... stuff. You're the only ones who might believe me. Someone is going to try to kill me. Someone who isn't even alive. It's going to start soon, it's..." Sarah's eyes widen in fear.

Standing in front of the buffet table between a pair of confused hipsters is a man dressed in full Santa Claus outfit. This is no jolly old elf, however. The figure's skin is a pale green hue and his eyes pitch black. Worse, he seems to be ever so slightly translucent.

On the other side of the buffet table a student in a Fighting Raven's football jersey exclaims "Cool costume brah! I can see right through it!" before a turkey fork flies out of the centerpiece and spears him in the neck. "RUN!"

Sarah shouts.

Using his Spirit Storm ability, Ratliff sends cutlery and glasses in the hall flying in the general direction of Sarah. The next round this is followed by chairs and anything else his ability can pick up. The entire hall turns into a single screaming stampede. Sarah grabs a metal platter from the center of the table and holds it to her back as a shield as she charges out.

For the study group, escaping is a Dramatic Task. Each student must acquire five successes in Agility to escape unharmed. Complications include getting pushed out of the way by another scrambling student, getting hit by a low flying fork or tripping over and getting trampled. Anyone who fails to get five successes takes a level of Fatigue from Bumps and Bruises. Those who fail to achieve more than two successes also take a wound. Anyone who critically fails falls under the stampede and barely escapes with their lives, taking two wounds and a fatigue level.

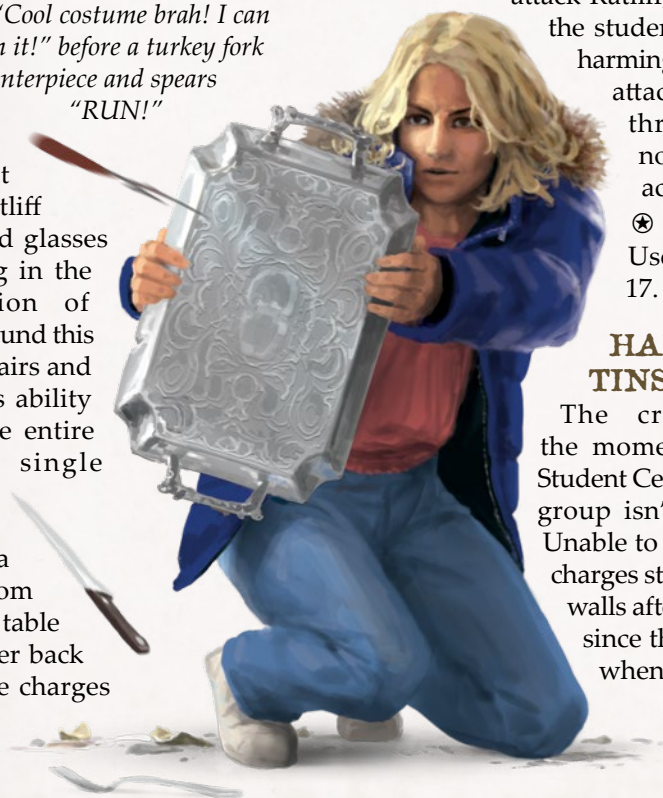
There's a good chance a hero decides to try and help the injured student or attack Ratliff himself. If they choose not to run then have them declare their action at the beginning of the Dramatic Task. The player then rolls the appropriate Trait instead of Agility, for example Persuasion to calm the stampede, Healing to help the frat kid who got forked, Taunt to distract Ratliff, and so on. If they get five successes then their plan works and if they don't then they get trampled in the stampede as if they critically failed. Either way they see Ratliff fly out of the room after Sarah.

Should any reckless young undergrad attack Ratliff, let them. Unless the student has a means of harming ethereal foes, the attack passes straight through and they now have one less action.

⊗ **Marshal Ratliff:**
Use profile on page 17.

HANGING TINSEL

The crowd disperses the moment they exit the Student Center, but the study group isn't home free yet. Unable to find Sarah, Ratliff charges straight through the walls after the study group since they were with her when he manifested.



The phantom catches up with them next to a large Christmas tree outside the building. He shouts "WHERE IS MARION?" and uses his Hangman special ability to animate several strings of tinsel (one for each hero present) from the tree into nooses and attacks the heroes.

Deal out the Action Cards.

- ★ **Marshal Ratliff:** Use profile on page 17. Marshal uses all his actions controlling the tinsel.

On the second round, have any students who aren't getting strangled make Notice rolls. A success means they notice the transparent form of a man dressed in late twenties attire looking angrily at Ratliff.

If the battle lasts three rounds or more then Sarah comes running out and helps.

- ★ **Sarah Herron:** Use profile on page 17.

When the tinsel is all defeated, the other ghost launches himself at Ratliff. Ratliff screams "DAVIS!" angrily and the pair vanish. If Sarah hasn't arrived yet, she arrives now. From this point onward treat her as Friendly (on the Reaction Table) toward the study group.

Sarah stomps on the last pieces of tinsel on the floor and grinds them into the ground with her foot. "I'm sorry to have dragged you into this. You can see I'm in real trouble here. Does your family have their funny holiday traditions? Well, this is mine!"

Sarah feels guilty about what happened in the Student Center. This is the earliest Ratliff has ever appeared on the 23rd. She thought she had more time. If it helps lighten the mood somewhat, have the study group notice the Frat boy who took a fork to the throat escorted out by medics, injured but alive declaring this the "Most awesome Christmas ever!"

No doubt the study group is full of questions for Sarah now. She does what she can to answer them. She knows quite a bit, but not everything. Sarah begins by describing the first tragic attack that took her parents, then briefly describes attacks in the subsequent years and her own research in between.

Sarah learned about an old relative, Marion, who testified at a robbery trial that put Ratliff and his gang in prison. She has thus easily

deduced the undead who come for her every year are Ratliff and his gang. She knows he will make brief hauntings between the evening of the 23rd and midnight Christmas Eve. Each haunting will get progressively worse, until right before Christmas Day when he will appear corporeally and try to kill her.

She also knows killing him when he's corporeal doesn't work. He can be put down but comes back the next year. She knows Ratliff was the last person to be lynched publicly in Texas and the man who seems to want to stop him is a member of his gang, Louis Davis.

She knows some articles insinuate Marion's mother, Josephine, was an associate of Ratliff's gang, but Josephine took the truth to her grave. Sarah also does not know about Davis's affection for Marion, or the existence of the gang's buried riches. If asked if she wants their help to survive him this year, or something similar she replies.

"No. I want to work out how to stop him forever."

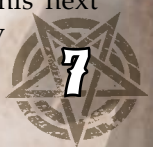
AFTERMATH

The nature and timing of the attacks means the heroes are in a race against time before the ghost returns. The students probably want to get on with the job of stopping Ratliff right away.

If the study group happens to be the kind of cold hearted humbugs who can give Ebenezer Scrooge a run for his money, they may try to get Sarah to pay them for their help. Sarah is frankly amazed and shocked by them if they do this. She tells them exactly where they can shove their help. If they don't change their minds then she storms off.

That night Ratliff turns up and haunts them. He blames them for Sarah's escape and wants to punish them before he tries to kill her tomorrow. Make it something so nasty they fear for their own safety enough to help her.

If they STILL refuse to help, then have their Christmas Day festivities interrupted by the police, who question them about the discovery of Sarah's shotgun riddled corpse. Let the guilt sink in. Then over the course of the next year, let a series of hauntings inform them Ratliff has chosen them as his next target. Now the curse is exclusively on them until they solve it.



GO RESEARCH, MERRY GENTLEMEN

The study group has about thirty-six hours to discover how to defeat Ratliff and carry out their plan before Ratliff reaches the peak of his strength. As soon as the clocks strike midnight for Christmas Day, Ratliff will be gone and the study group will have missed their chance for another year.

From here, several potential avenues lay open to them.

HIT THE BOOKS

THE LIBRARY

If they go to the Sam Rayburn Library and make a successful Investigation roll then the students find a local history book vividly describing the robbery on December 23rd, 1927 and the events which followed. This includes Ratliff's gang getting caught, the

trial, the attempt at prison escape, and his public lynching outside the prison building. The book also reveals 'Bit' Bedford died in action trying to stop Ratliff, whom he'd always had an eye on.

A Raise on the Investigation roll means the students infer from the book that Josephine Herron was known to associate with the gang, might have actually been involved in the robbery herself, and escaped justice. They also find a record from the trial indicating Ratliff and his cronies refused to reveal where they hid the stolen money.

NEWSPAPERS

Alternatively some smart researcher might get the idea to visit the Hearst Art and Journalism Center and trawl through their archive of local newspapers. An Investigation roll to search the archive on the computer reveals newspaper articles from the day itself and from the day of the lynching. The article from the robbery describes the gang's raid going well until a young girl named Marion

Herron informed Police Chief 'Bit' Bedford of a robbery in progress. The scene turned chaotic when several citizens who wanted a piece of the potential \$5,000 bounty on robbers joined the fray. Ratliff shot Bedford, and an eyewitness heard Bedford cry "I'll never stop watchin' you Ratliff," as he lay dying.

The article on the lynching describes how Ratliff tried to feign insanity and escape by killing a guard at Eastland Prison. The people of the town mobbed him and strung him in front of the jail.

Anyone who gets a Raise on the Investigation roll or directly searches for 'Bit' Bedford discovers his badge is currently in a glass case in the Golan County Sheriff's Office lobby.

OCCULT RESEARCH

Our precocious undergrads may decide to take a more occult approach, as well. If so, they need access to a more esoteric information source than a mundane library or the Internet. If they do, then an Investigation roll at -2 to research



Ratliff's M.O. suggests he's a revenant. That is, he is a spirit bound to a certain vengeful act. The type of revenant matching Ratliff's description is only able to operate for a limited time once a year, growing in power until becoming fully corporeal.

If the amateur occultists already know the *grave speak* ritual, a Smarts roll helps them realize they could summon Bit Bedford's ghost for help. However, they need an object with a strong connection to the former Sheriff. If they do not already know the ritual, a Knowledge (Occult) roll suggests a *séance* (using *grave speak*) could provide answers. From there, they can either research the ritual on their own or go to a trusted expert such as GlenMac.

If anyone directly looks into how to kill a revenant (a good thing to know in advance) then a Knowledge (Occult) roll at -2 or an Investigation roll at -4 reveals the need for an item tied to the target's past. A Raise reveals the most common item is the weapon which killed the revenant in the first place.

If anyone decides to look for the rope which killed Ratliff, an Investigation roll to search the Internet reveals it is on display at the Eastland Museum of Law Enforcement. This small building is all that remains of the old prison in Eastland and is attached to the modern Sheriff's Office and jail building at 210 W. White Street. If the students decide to start by going straight for the rope then skip ahead to The Fight Before Christmas.

ASK AROUND

As well as looking up the answers in books and computers, the heroes can ask other people for help.

Sue Tindir, of course, knows quite a lot about the history of the town and the robbery itself due to the sensational aspect of "Santa Claus" robbing a bank. If the heroes ask her then she is very happy to talk—especially after the extraordinary events of the previous night. If they didn't realize her expertise and just look for someone on campus who can help, a Streetwise roll points them her way.

Sue knows Ratliff had three companions and knows them by name. She suspects Josephine Herron was also in league with them. She also knows Josephine's daughter's name

PUT IT ON HOLD

If the students are the sort who carry a book of rituals up their sleeves, they may well have thought of an alternative solution.

The *banish* ritual would be able to get rid of Ratliff temporarily and perhaps they think it the perfect way to end Sarah's problems. If they go with this plan then let it work....for a time.

At the conclusion of the ritual Ratliff screams in rage at the study group as he is banished. For a while the students can enjoy their victory, until Ratliff starts to break back through. From around spring break onward, when drawing for High Strangeness, occasionally include something to suggest Ratliff is coming back. Maybe they hear him scream "Marion" or one of their names angrily. Perhaps they see a silhouette of his form in their own shadows. Maybe a 1920s radio station plays Christmas songs out of an unpowered music player.

The next 23rd of December, Ratliff returns fully and the students are now at the top of his naughty list. He is also more powerful than before. Increase some of his Traits and add a few Monstrous Abilities of your choice. Make it nasty enough to prove further delay isn't an option.

was Marion and believes Davis had a quasi-paternal relationship with her.

She also asks the study group:

"Was that Marshal Ratliff we saw last night? Is he a ghost? If only the ghost of 'Bit' was here to fight him. That would be awesome."

They might also choose to talk to GlenMac about the incident. GlenMac did not attend the dinner, but perks up at mention of Ratliff's appearance. If they relay to him the information Sarah told them about the way in which Ratliff acts each year then he recognizes Ratliff as a revenant. If not, then he assumes Ratliff to be some sort of ghost.



CRIME & PUNISHMENT

What with getting hold of the badge and the rope later on, it's pretty near impossible for the study group to succeed in this adventure without breaking the law in some way. Some students are clever enough to pull this off without leaving a trace. For those who aren't, there's a good chance this could cause trouble for them further down the line.

How you deal with this is up to you. You may decide as long as the students return the stolen items, the spirit of Christmas (and perhaps the spirit of 'Bit') takes hold of the Sheriff and he lets them off. Alternatively, this may be a plot seed for a later adventure. Maybe there wasn't quite enough evidence to bring charges against them and now an officer is dogging their every move. Perhaps they find out the police are planning to arrest one of the students in relation to the robbery and now the students have to decide whether to plead guilty, try and destroy the evidence, or flee. Maybe the Sheriff gives them all community service and while cleaning up graffiti in town the tags start to form a message pointing them towards their next adventure. Illegal activity should have consequences, but it shouldn't mean the end of the game.

If he realizes Ratliff's nature, GlenMac knows they need a very specific bane to defeat him for good. He doesn't know what exactly, but explains it would be connected to Ratliff's life somehow. He suggests they consult the spirit world and asks if they know of anyone Ratliff killed, as their spirits would have the most powerful reason to help.

If the study group mentions 'Bit' Bedford, GlenMac suggests he can perform a séance to summon Bedford's ghost but needs a personal possession. He knows Bedford's badge is on display in the sheriff's office and sends the study group off to fetch it.

GETTING THE BADGE

To contact the ghost of 'Bit' Bedford, the students need to get his badge from a glass case in the lobby of the Golan County Sheriff's Department. It's nearly Christmas but the law doesn't take a break for the holidays. A heist in the Sheriff's Department is no small task.

ASKING NICELY

Good luck buddy. Sheriff Anderson doesn't just part with a priceless piece of Golan history for some wide eyed student with a few decent lyrics on their lips.

Firstly, the would-be silver-tongue has to actually meet the Sheriff and he's a busy man. Then they must present a reason to borrow the badge. "Howdy Sheriff, we need this old tin star to summon up a ghost to defeat the Anti-Santa" isn't going to cut it.

If the excuse is good enough and the Sheriff doesn't throw them out, they have to defeat the Sheriff in Social Conflict. The study groups rolls at -4 unless they come up with something really clever.

AN INSIDE MAN

The study group met James Park when he gave each of them an invite to the holiday feast. James currently works as a volunteer at the Sheriff's Department and can, in theory, help them on the inside.

When he met them previously he began as Neutral on the Reaction Table. If the heroes are nice to him then he provides them with some simple helpful information such as the building layout or where exactly the badge is kept. He even parts with the usual schedule of the officers who work there, in as much as he knows it.

The study group needs to persuade him up to at least Friendly before he considers taking a risk to help them. Even then, it requires a Persuasion or Intimidation roll at -2.

If the study group wants him to actually break the law for them (such as try and steal the badge himself) they need him to be Helpful on the Reaction Table, and making a Persuasion or Intimidation roll at -4.

HOLIDAY HEIST

If the heroes involve Sarah in their plans, she's game for just swiping the badge.

The badge is in a glass case in the public lobby. A single counter stretches across the length of the room. During working hours, Sergeant Latoya Jones sits on the other side of the counter. There are also 1d4 officers elsewhere in the building at any one time.

- **Sergeant Latoya Jones:** Use County Sheriff Deputy/Pinebox Police Officer profile in *East Texas University*

The glass case has a single lock at the bottom and the key is in a drawer behind the counter. A Lockpicking roll also gets it open. Finally, the glass case can be smashed if the students throw any pretense of subtlety out the window.

ATTACK!

Hopefully the study group hasn't forgotten about Ratliff himself, because he hasn't just been biding his time. He's been waiting for the perfect opportunity to attack and he's grown in strength since the feast.

The moment the study group has the badge, High Strangeness strikes. The lights dim, unearthly bells ring through the building, and the red baubles decorating the corridor behind the lobby turn to blood and shatter. Deputy Latoya and any officers in the building immediately run to try and stop whatever is going on. Unfortunately for the students, this was exactly Ratliff's plan. Getting the officers out of the way means there's nobody to protect the heroes from his undead gang members.

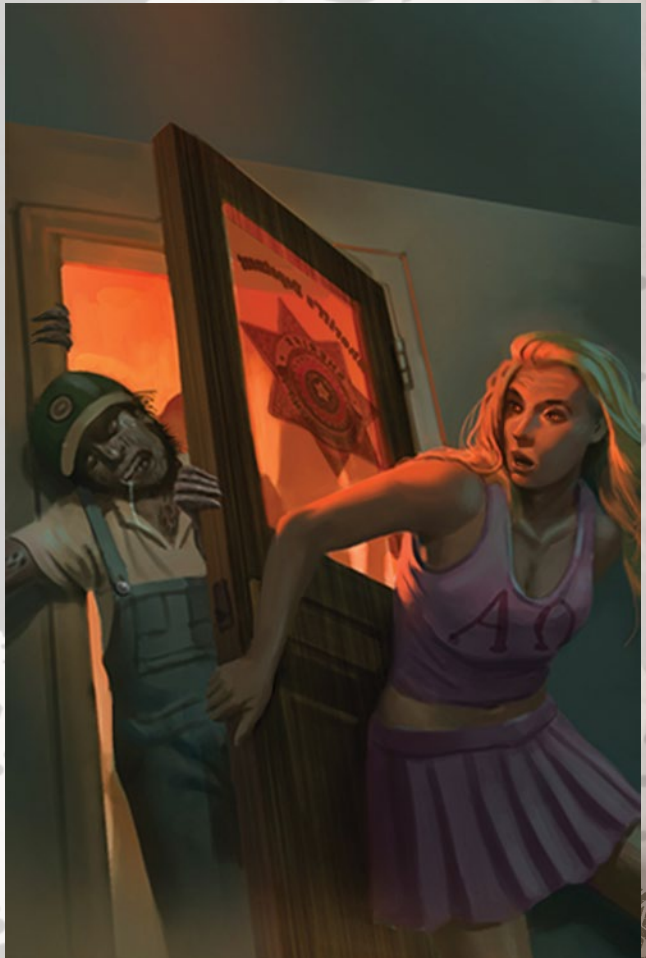
All three of his gang rise as zombies from the Sheriff's Department lawn and head straight toward the study group.

- **Louis Davis, Henry Helms, Robert Hill:** Use the Thug profile from *East Texas University*. Add the Undead monstrous ability (+2 Toughness). They are armed with knives.

Davis deliberately does not attack Sarah if she is present. A Notice roll at -2 lets someone see Davis appears very reluctant. A Raise means they get the impression he is attacking against his will.

Distraction or no, a big fight with these undead gangsters attracts attention. Although the deputy officers help put down the zombies, the students have a lot of explaining to do if the officers notice the badge is gone—especially if the students leave the lobby wrecked.

Avoiding combat is the smartest option. The front door is pretty big, as are the windows which the students can use for escape if the bandits block the door. If the heroes decide to run, play this as a five round foot Chase (See the Chase rules in *Savage Worlds*) to get back to the cars. Once far enough away from where they were summoned, the zombies crumble to ash and vanish.



A 'BIT' OF A SEANCE

If the study group successfully takes possession of Bit's Badge, they have what they need to summon his ghost. Treat the séance as the *grave speak* ritual, although given Bit's interest in stopping Ratliff he comes willingly and does not offer an opposed roll. The badge isn't ruined by the ritual, so it is possible to return it when they're done. If GlenMac is asked, he leads the séance and others may assist rolling Ritualism or Smarts at -2. Otherwise, the students can attempt it on their own, following all the usual rules for rituals.

If the séance is successful then read the following:

For a moment nothing happens, then a cold winter wind blows up and circles around you. The badge quivers, then leaps into the air and hovers.

The ghostly figure of a colossal man dressed in an old style police uniform appears around the badge. The badge continues to float, exactly where it would have been pinned on to his body, as he looks over each of you slowly.

"Y'all better have had a good reason for takin' my badge. I don't take kindly to lawbreakers."

He reaches for where he imagines his gun is, then remembers he's a ghost and gives an awkward nod.

'Bit' starts as Uncooperative on the Reaction Table. If the students mention Ratliff then he immediately jumps to Neutral. A successful Persuasion roll can shift him to Friendly and a Raise to Helpful.

'Bit' has been true to his dying curse, watching Ratliff's spirit ever since the people of Eastland lynched him. He knows pretty much all there is to know about what's going on and answers whatever questions they have. Here are a few likely questions and answers:

HOW DO WE STOP RATLIFF?

The ghost exhales in a long, drawn out whistle.

"Ain't any easy way to tell y'all this. Only thing gonna put that snake back where he came from is the rope that done hung him in the first place. You're gonna have to geddit around his neck and hang him all over again. You'll be able to hurt him when he has a body, maybe even put him down for a bit. But without the noose, he'll just be back again next year.

"Right now that rope is on display at the Eastland Jail. You're gonna need to get there, and soon. The moment the clock strikes midnight on the 24th, your chance will be gone until next year. That is, if he don't kill the girl first."

WHY IS RATLIFF AFTER SARAH?

"Sounds to me like he's confused her for her ancestor. Marion was the one who told me the robbery was takin' place. Marion was the one whose testimony sealed Ratliff's fate. When he met his maker, last thing he did was swear revenge on her. In fairness, that girl does look just like her. Ya' know, I heard Louis Davis—he's one of Ratliff's gang—had a soft spot for Marion. Mebbe y'all can use that to your advantage."

WHO IS THE GHOST WE SAW GET RID OF RATLIFF AFTER THE FEAST?

"That would be Louis Davis. He was a friend of Josephine Herron that Ratliff brought in at the last moment. Don't reckon he really wanted to be involved that much. I heard he was fond of Marion. Sounds like he was trying to protect you that night, though he may be under Ratliff's control now. Be careful."

CAN YOU HELP US TAKE RATLIFF DOWN?

"I'm dead, folks. Ain't a lot I can do while he's on your side of the divide. Send him back my way though, and I promise I'll crack him so hard in the noggin they'll be pulling ectoplasm off the walls of hell for centuries."

AFTERMATH

After he's answered their questions, 'Bit' departs. Before he does though, he gives one last warning.

*As the ghost fades away you hear him say.
"Y'all better make sure that badge gets back
where you found it. Else I'll have a fresh cell
with your name on it waiting when you
cross over."*

Now the study group knows they need to get to the museum at the jail in Eastland and retrieve the rope.

Ideally it is the evening of Christmas Eve. If they have managed to find an answer much quicker, consider delaying the students to keep the tension high in the next chapter. This can be as simple as having Ratliff hit them with another haunting, a complication from the Overprotective Parents or Annoying Roommate Hindrances, or a used vehicle Glitch.

When the study group begins the road trip to Eastland, continue to **The Fight Before Christmas**.

STRANGER THAN FICTION?

Believe it or not, much of the backstory in *Horror for the Holidays* is based on historical events. Our villain really did rob an East Texas bank dressed as Santa Claus.

Ratliff was also the last ever man to be publicly lynched in Texas and the rope that hanged him is on display in the Eastland Law Enforcement Museum.

If you want to know more of the true history - a quick Internet search for "Santa Claus bank robbery" or "lynching of Santa Claus" will turn up a lot of the real events. You can even integrate this into the game. If the study group uses their smart phones to search for "Marshal Ratliff" or similar, have the players actually search it on their phones! The only big difference is that in the world of ETU, Ratliff robbed the bank in Pinebox.



THE FIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

The study group knows what they need to defeat Ratliff. Unfortunately it's on display in the museum attached to the county jail in Eastland and Christmas day is only hours away. If the students have included her this far, Sarah will do her best to come along with them.

CRASHING THROUGH THE SNOW

It's a nearly two hour drive from Pinebox to Eastland, and that's on a good day with no traffic. On Christmas Eve the traffic is far from favorable. What's more, a few miles out of town they meet a sleet storm. The roads are icy and the drive is even more treacherous.

Making the trip safely is a Dramatic Task using the Driving skill. Possible complications include unexpected heavy traffic, a sudden flurry of sleet, or a large patch of black ice. On the third round things are made even more complicated when some High Strangeness occurs. On what appeared to be a curiously deserted part of the road, a ghostly Nash 239 comes from behind our heroes. The vintage car races along beside the students. People fire guns out of the windows and scream about tracking down Ratliff for a \$5,000 bounty. The phantom car can't hurt the study group, but the distraction adds an extra -2 to the remaining Driving rolls.

If the driver fails the Dramatic Task or fails a roll when a club is drawn, then their car spins out and crashes into a ditch. Now the group is stranded somewhere between Pinebox and Eastland. Extracting the car takes 2d6 hours and a tow truck, or nearby rancher with a truck or tractor. Spending a Benny cuts this time in half.

If a driver rolls snake eyes on a club in the Dramatic Task then they wipe out completely and hit a tree. The car is no longer drivable and everyone inside takes 2d10 damage.

EASTLAND

When the study group reaches the city, read the following:

You drive through the relentless sleet down West Main Street. To

either side of you widely spaced, single story houses are covered in Christmas lights, tinsel and a disturbingly large number of novelty Santas.

As you turn left onto North Lamar street and arrive at the County Jail and Law Enforcement Museum, some of you can't help but think if you never see that chubby red coated man again, it will be too soon.

EASTLAND LAW ENFORCEMENT MUSEUM

The museum is situated on the corner of N. Lamar and W. White street. It's only ever open by appointment, which must be made by calling the Sheriff's Office. He's definitely not coming in and opening up the museum for a bunch of undergrads in the last few hours of the 24th.

There are three entrances into the two story building. It is of course possible the study group might try to scale the building and break a window or some other alternative plan for entry. If they do come up with some ingenious scheme, be sure to reward them for creative thinking.

The first obvious way into the museum is through the main entrance. It's a double door and is locked tight. It's also in perfect view of the Eastland Hotel, where a large crowd is leaving a Christmas Eve party.

It's going to take a Lockpicking roll at -2 to open the door and a Stealth roll at -4 to do it without getting spotted. The door has a Toughness of 8. If they choose to break it down though, they are almost certainly going to attract attention.

The second option would be to go in through the Sheriff's Office and Jail next door. The buildings are connected, and a door leads from one to the other. The door to the Sheriff's Office is at least open. However, the door to the museum is closed and the officer on the desk isn't just going to let them waltz in.

- **Officer:** See police officer profile in *East Texas University*.

The officer is not happy about pulling the late shift and would much rather be at home with his family. He starts as Uncooperative on the Reaction Table, but a successful Persuasion roll can bring him to Neutral and a Raise to Friendly. If he is Friendly and the

study group spin a convincing tale then he is persuaded to let them in. Getting out this way with the rope is trickier.

The third and probably best option to get into the museum is the side entrance. If the students go to the Sheriff's Office they pass it on their right. It's a small white, wooden door. It can be opened with a Lockpicking roll or a reckless student can break it down (Toughness 8, see Breaking Things in Savage Worlds). This is the door outside which Ratliff was lynched in 1929. As they approach the door, the beam above it creaks as if a heavy weight was just suspended from it.

When someone tries to open the door by any means, read that student the following:

As you're about to touch the door you feel like your throat is being constricted and you can hear the sounds of a large angry mob. Somebody shouts. "Maybe he wants to talk?"

Involuntarily you cough and splutter. Your tongue is caught in the back of your mouth. You gasp for air. Then another voice: "He don't wanna talk? Let's string him up then!"

For a second it feels like your neck snaps. Then the pain and the voices are all gone.

This can't actually hurt the unlucky undergrad, but it's scary as hell. Have the student make a Fear roll.

Inside the museum, the rope is easy to locate. It's mounted on the wall in its own glass case. If the students don't take precautions to silence their actions, give the officer a Notice roll if they break the glass. With the rope in hand, the heroes are almost in the clear. There is just one more grizzly task to do.



HANG HIM MERRILY ON HIGH

Just outside the side entrance, a memorial tile marks the spot of the lynching in 1929. Ratliff stands waiting for the heroes. When the students exit the museum, read the following:

As you walk out of the building a sharp chill blows through you. The sleet seems to have come to an abrupt halt. It also appears the entire city has emptied out. Maybe everyone suddenly went home, but looking around the silent streets you sense you are so very alone.

Except for them.

Standing at a stone marker is a very angry and very dead man holding a shotgun. Ratliff's blood red Santa costume contrasts sharply with his putrid, green flesh. Behind him stand three men as dead as their leader. On the left, you see the man who attacked Ratliff's ghost last night.

[If Sarah is present] He looks towards Sarah with pain in his eyes.

"Marion?" he rasps.

A CHANCE FOR REDEMPTION

Your heroes have just a few moments to convince Louis Davis to help them again. If they dawdle then don't hesitate to go straight to initiative.

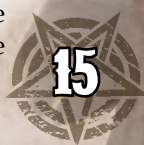
If the students included Sarah enough for her to have worked out Davis' fondness for Marion then she steps forward and speaks up.

"Louis! It's me Marion! Help me!"

But Ratliff barks "You'll do as you're told, Davis."

This is Social Conflict with the students in opposed rolls against Ratliff (who rolls Intimidation). If the students succeed then Davis turns his gun on Ratliff. Let the players control him as an Extra. If they win by five or more successes then Davis begins the combat on Hold and has The Drop on Ratliff and his partners.

Either way, there's no more time for Christmas cheer. It's time for the Action Deck.





• **Louis Davis, Henry Helms, and Robert Hill:** Use the Thug profile from *East Texas University*. Add the Undead Monstrous Ability (+2 Toughness!). They are armed with shotguns.

★ **Marshal Ratliff:** See profile on page 17. He is armed with a double barrel shotgun.

AND A REVENANT IN A PEAR TREE

When Ratliff is Incapacitated and his lackeys have fallen, another wind blows up and Davis, Hill and Helms all vanish. As they disappear, the sound of cars driving down Main Street returns.

Obviously if the heroes somehow managed to lynch him WITHOUT Incapacitating him first, then skip this section. Otherwise the students now have five minutes to string up

Ratliff and do so without anyone noticing.

Luckily for the heroes, there is a tree right outside the museum which would do the job perfectly. At this point it would be pretty cruel to let them fail at the final hurdle as long as they don't do anything stupid. Still, there's no harm in playing this up for all the drama it's worth. You might even want to do a countdown of the last few seconds when they finally string him up successfully.

Ratliff lets out one final angry scream, then his body turns soft and white. Moments later it crumbles. A huge gust of wind catches the flakes and blows them up into the air, scattering them everywhere like the snow which slowly begins to fall on the town.

[If Sarah is present.] Sarah sits down and lets out a breath she's been holding in for three years. She looks at you in joy and relief.

In the distance, you hear a clock chime midnight, ringing in the first moments of Christmas day.

AFTERMATH

Sarah is incredibly grateful to the study group and happily assists them with anything else as she continues to study at ETU for the next few years.

Also, if the study group managed to convince Davis to help them in the final battle then there is one more reward in store for them.

As the last clang of midnight chimes you see the faint spectral form of Louis Davis appear.

"Thanks for helping my little Marion." He says, his form rapidly fading. "I always wanted her to have my ill-gotten riches. Dig under the oak tree in the back of her momma's house. It's all there."

With one last smile, he disappears.

It takes an Investigation roll to find the address of the house once owned by Josephine Herron. It also needs a good plan to get in there and start digging up the yard without the permission of the current owners.

If the students manage it though, they find a metal trunk containing a small amount of circa 1927 gold bullion now worth almost exactly \$5,000. Merry Christmas, students!

CHARACTERS

★ SARAH HERRON

Sarah, a blonde ETU freshman who grew up in Eastland, Texas, has been haunted by Ratliff for the last three years. He killed her parents but with the help of the study group she hopes she can finally be free of the curse.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d8, Strength d6, Vigor d8

Skills: Driving d6, Fighting d6, Knowledge (Criminal Justice) d4, Notice d6, Persuasion d6, Shooting d6, Stealth d6

Cha: 0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 6

Hindrances: Heroic, Loyal

Edges: Quick, Elan, Hard To Kill

Gear: Ruger handgun (Range 10/20/40, Damage 2d6-1, ROF 1, Shots 9, Semi-Auto), Smart Phone

★ MARSHAL RATLIFF

Ratliff is the last man to be publicly lynched in Texas. Now he's a murderous spirit out for revenge. He's dressed in the red Santa Claus costume he wore during the robbery foiled by young Marion, but his skin bears the putrid green of death. Ratliff is obsessed with killing Sarah—Marion's descendant—and if the study group gets in the way he has no problem destroying them too.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d6, Spirit d8, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d10, Intimidation d8, Notice d6, Shooting d6

Cha: -2; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 7; **Toughness:** 9

Gear: Double-Barrel Shotgun (Range 12/24/48, Damage 1-3d6, ROF 1-2, Shots 2), Santa costume.

Hindrances: Mean, Vengeful, Vow (Kill Sarah)

Edges: Brawny, Improved Level Headed, Improved Nerves of Steel, Rock and Roll!

Special Abilities:

- **Ghost:** Until the final night of his haunting, Ratliff appears in a completely incorporeal form. During this time he cannot be harmed except by magic.

- **Hangman:** As an action, Ratliff can animate any rope or ropelike material to strangle a foe. This is an opposed Fighting roll to grapple. If it succeeds then every round afterwards the victim must make an opposed Agility or Strength roll to break free or suffer a level of fatigue. Anyone Incapacitated this way suffers the same incapacitation effects as Drowning.

- **Immunity:** Ratliff can be harmed and even Incapacitated, but unless he is killed by his weakness he just comes back again the next year.

- **Spirit Storm:** This causes a storm of nearby objects in a Large Burst Template. Anyone within suffers damage equal to the ghost's Spirit+d6 each round. The objects might be a chaotic swirl or targeted projectiles such as a coordinated attack of silverware.

- **Undead:** +2 Toughness, +2 to recover from being Shaken, no extra damage from called shots.

- **Weakness (Lynched With The Same Rope):** The only way to dispatch Ratliff permanently is to hang him with the rope he was originally lynched with in 1929.



Office of the Dean
1 Raven's Loop
Pinebox, TX

Dear Student,

We would like to invite you to celebrate a holiday meal in the Student Center at 7 pm on the 23rd of this month. While many students are unable to be with their families at this time of year, it would be our pleasure if you would celebrate the occasion with us - your academic family.

Should you wish to attend, please dress in business-casual attire, or if you prefer, in holiday fancy dress.

Looking forward to seeing you there,
President James Nelson

Go Ravens!

James Nelson

President James Nelson