

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, MAIN STREET - AN HOUR BEFORE DUSK -
ESTABLISHING

The sun is preparing to set in the west. With all the buildings in town surrounding the dirt roads, it might just as well be night. The town is almost completely shut down for the night. There are only three buildings with lights on within our view: the hotel, and two saloons (one across the street from the hotel, the other further down the street). Piano music can be heard, slowly getting louder as...

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, MAIN STREET - AN HOUR BEFORE DUSK - CLOSER

From the east side of town JOHN MERRITT rides in on a brown horse. He is dressed in a dusty white shirt and some off-color pants and leather boots. His hair is dirty and wind-shapen. He is in desperate need of a shave.

The horse's patter is slow, and both man and beast look as if they haven't rested in days.

He directs the horse to the first saloon he comes to - "Dusty Dudes" reads the sign on the window - jumps off the horse and ties it up, pats it on the head and, with a gruff, thirsty mouth, says

JOHN MERRITT
Get some rest, there, Annabelle.

Annabelle whinnies at him and backs up only to end up pulling the rope a little tighter, and bends her neck down to drink from the dirty trough water.

Merritt walks up the two rickety stairs to the creaky walkway and...

CUT TO:

INT. DUSTY DUDES SALOON - NIGHT

...enters the saloon to hear the piano music nice and loud, seeing a rather large group of people. Some are at tables playing cards, others just "shooting the bull," and still others with ladies of the night on their laps.

Speaking of ladies of the night, there are three on the stairwell on the back of the room, and two on the walkway above. Three upstairs doors are shut that he can see.

The folks at the bar seem to be loners, not interested in talkin', just drinkin'.

On one wall is the piano with a player sitting at it. He's gangly, bald, and looks to be about eighty.

In the corner on Merritt's right next to the window is a man in a black suit and black Stetson. He has a drink in his left hand, and he's twirling a .44 on his right middle finger.

The man looks up at Merritt and grins. The two politely nod to each other, and Merritt walks up to the bar to be stared down by a woman: 6'1", 200-lb,

RAYANNE POTTER
What can I getcha, feller? A
Sas'parilla?

Merritt doesn't act like he cares.

JOHN MERRITT
Beer. A big glass of beer will do.

She eyes him again with some distaste.

RAYANNE POTTER
Right away.

GUY AT BAR #1
Hey, Rayanne, fill'er up, will'ya?

The man is wasted, and the words tumble out of his mouth like a badly-stacked wagon of empty barrels.

She grabs the other's mug, turns away, grabs an empty one, and fills both to the top till the foam is dripping down the sides, then turns and practically slams them down on the table in front of the two men, with no spill.

While the other man gingerly nurses his drink, Merritt smirks, winks at her, and grabs the glass to take a swig, beer running down the sides of his mouth and onto his shirt.

RAYANNE POTTER leans onto the table as he chugs the beer. Her eyes still meander over his body a little, but finally she says

RAYANNE POTTER
I ain't ne'er seen you around here
before. Yer' new in town, aincha'?

He finishes off the mug and slams it down, wipes his mouth with his shirt sleeve and nods.

JOHN MERRITT

Yes, ma'am.

She shakes her head.

RAYANNE POTTER

Seems a cryin' shame you got inta'
town only a day after the carnival
an'all. You could'a had ya' some
real fun...

JOHN MERRITT

I'm looking for one of them fine
young wallflowers,
(thumbs at the ladies on
the stairwell)
a good night's sleep, and maybe a
fast job to make some ends-meat.
Know where I can get those?

RAYANNE POTTER

The wallflowers're fer rentin',
so's a good night's sleep in one o'
my se'enteen guest rooms. As fer a
job, well, those'r in short supply
'round here right now.

JOHN MERRITT

Then I'll just stick with the first
two and be on my way in the
morning. What do I owe you?

She grabs a sheet, sets it on the counter, and starts making
a tabulation in front of him.

RAYANNE POTTER

Half a dollar fer the drink, five
bucks fer the wallflower...
(she stops the pencil to
smile at him)
...yer choice...
...and the room is a dollar.
Cypher it up, and that's ...
breath ... six and a half
dollars.

He pulls out a small wad of cash, finds a 10-note and hands
it to her.

JOHN MERRITT

In that case, I'll take another
beer.

While Rayanne fulfills his request, the man with the black suit and Stetson taps him on the shoulder.

Speaking just a little louder than his inside voice, ROBERT WILSON catches the attention only of those nearby.

ROBERT WILSON

That's quite a load o' cash you got there, mister. What'dja do? Rob a bank?

Merritt stands up from the bar stool and faces down Wilson, as Merritt is at least a half a foot taller than him. A handful of people at one of the closest tables get up and walk out the saloon door. Rayanne sets the full mug down at Merritt's spot.

JOHN MERRITT

Do you need something, mister.

ROBERT WILSON

Yeah. I need to know if you robbed that bank in St. Louie...

The piano player stops his song and turns around.

At this point, Wilson turns around to make sure the rest of the room can hear him.

ROBERT WILSON

I read it in the newspaper today. A man fittin' yer description robbed a bank six days ago in St. Louie. What'da'ya got to say fer yerself?

JOHN MERRITT

Well, first off, I don't think you can read. Second, I think you're blind if you think that small wad of cash in my pocket was from robbing a bank. Third, I've never been to St. Louis. Finally, I think you made that up.

ROBERT WILSON

(still playing to the crowd)

The man's callin' me a liar. When you walked in, I could tell you was lookin' fer trouble. Ain't you just the type o' man to be lookin' at the bank with a shifty eye?

Merritt gets a look of pleasant surprise as he takes a brief glance at the now-watching patrons.

JOHN MERRITT

If you're looking for a fight,
mister, you picked the wrong man.
I'm just passing through. I'm
tired, horny, and just want to get
some rest.

ROBERT WILSON

Well, then, let's see what we can
do fer ya'.

As Wilson finishes the statement, he pulls back a fist and lets it fly right into the other's face. Merritt falls back against the bar, his elbow knocking the beer mug back at Rayanne, but he effectively catches his fall.

As Merritt stands back up and wipes blood from his mouth, he swings at Wilson who falls against a table, but pulls himself together and says with almost a laugh

ROBERT WILSON

A quick temper ... sure sign of a
thief an' a robber ... guaranteed.

JOHN MERRITT

Why, you...

Merritt grabs Wilson by the collar and pulls him up, but Wilson is ready with a right swing to Merritt's left kidney. Merritt manages to wing Wilson in the side of the head with his left elbow hard enough to knock the man to the ground, but quickly grabs his side.

As this fight continues, the less drunk patrons run over to pull the two apart, and within seconds the town marshal, WADE LUDERMAIN, walks into the saloon and yells

WADE LUDERMAIN

THAT'S ENOUGH!

The crowd settles and the way clears for Marshal Ludermain, a hard 6'3", 220-lb, all-muscle, all-man machine with a badge, making his way to the fighters. On either side of the Marshal are two non-descript deputies who look more like cheerleaders for the Marshal than what their badges would seem to indicate.

The Marshal walks up between Wilson and Merritt.

He looks at both in turn, giving each a full up-and-down before turning to Wilson -

WADE LUDERMAIN
I'd be willing to bet you started
this fight ...

He turns to look at Merritt and adds

WADE LUDERMAIN
... but then, I've never seen you
before. What's yer' name?

JOHN MERRITT
The name's John Merritt, Marshal.
I'm in town...

WADE LUDERMAIN
I didn't ask ya' fer yer' life
story, now did I? I got enough
problems on my plate tonight what
with another woman dead...

Rayanne looks surprised.

RAYANNE POTTER
Another one, Marshal? Who is it
this time?

WADE LUDERMAIN
The school teacher, Miss
Harkwood...

As the Marshal says this, there are gasps from several patrons.

Rayanne is absolutely heartbroken. She folds her hands and places them against her lips;

RAYANNE POTTER
Oh, little Maia...

The Marshal finishes

WADE LUDERMAIN
That's the third one in two weeks.
I got my eye on all the lowlifes
and dirty scoundrels in this town,
(and this to Merritt)
and any new folks, to be sure. I
wouldn't be goin' nowhere if I was
you...

Merritt sighs loud and looks away toward the stairs where two of the three women he saw earlier are still standing.

Marshal looks to Wilson.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Get out o' Rayanne's saloon. I toldja' twice ya' ain't ta' be in here.

ROBERT WILSON

Sorry, Marshal. 'Twon't happen again.

While Wilson is on his way out the door,

WADE LUDERMAIN

See that it don't.

The remaining patrons settle back down into their respective chairs while the Marshal and his deputies make a quiet exit.

Merritt turns to the bar and looks at Rayanne.

JOHN MERRITT

The dead woman he said was a schoolteacher. You knew her, I take it?

RAYANNE POTTER

Maia Harkwood was a charmin' young woman. Knew her parents before they was killed while she was out learnin' her ta' be a schoolteacher ... their house burnt ta' the ground with them in it.

JOHN MERRITT

...And the others?

RAYANNE POTTER

Lila and Elizabeth. They both worked nights at the tavern down the street...

(she pauses, trying not to cry)

Knew 'em both real well, I did.

It's evident Rayanne is tearing up, but she refuses to show any admittance to the fact.

JOHN MERRITT

I'm sorry for your loss. You can keep the change ... that is, if you still letting me rent a wallflower and a room.

Rayanne waves him off. He nods to her with,

JOHN MERRITT

Good night, then.

Rayanne looks at him, manages to sober up and adds,

RAYANNE POTTER

Get yerself cleaned up, too. I don't wantcha gettin' no blood on little Rosie over there.

Effectively informed that he no longer has a choice in "wallflowers," he walks up the stairs, nods his head at the one staring right at him, and the two make their way up the stairs while the other watches the man from behind.

CUT TO:

INT. DUSTY DUDES SALOON, ROOM 14 - NIGHT

The room is clean ... dusted and broomed might be more accurate. The lantern looks like it's been used too many times with soot stains that dim the glow somewhat.

The bed covers are nice and heavy, but are obviously worn from overuse. Even the bed seems to sway a little every time a step is taken.

ROSIE SANDERSON takes a washcloth from a stack in a drawer, dampens it in a half-full basin, and dabs his face of the blood that has already dried. She places the used cloth over the lip of the basin.

Then she turns and allows Merritt to begin undressing her, a little slower than either would probably like, but she seems satisfied.

JOHN MERRITT

You're a pretty lady, Rosie. What made you get into this life?

Rosie shrugs one shoulder as he removes a strap from the other side.

ROSIE SANDERSON

A lady's gotta have somethin' to do
to take up her time. Ain't no
suitors around here to my taste...

As he pulls the dress down around her waist, it falls to the floor with that heavy fabric sound.

JOHN MERRITT

What's your taste?

She grins as she turns to him, her nipples already swelling with excitement at this lean, muscular man.

ROSIE SANDERSON

My taste ain't hard to read, mister
Merritt. I had my eyes on this one
gentleman as he was walkin' in.

Merritt looks very satisfied with the answer as he allows her to take off his boots. He stands up and she reaches to his waist to take off his shirt, and proceeds to unbutton and unzip his pants.

Both of their undergarments come off as Rosie walks over to blow the light out. Merritt pulls the covers down and in the moonlight we see them lay down together as they kiss.

FADE TO:

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, MAIN STREET - MORNING

Marshal Ludermain walks down the street full of carts and buggies, horses with riders, and people going about their weekday morning business.

He enters the "Dusty Dudes" Saloon.

CUT TO:

INT. DUSTY DUDES SALOON, ROOM 14 - MORNING

The covers are all pulled down, but a thin sheet rests over Merritt and Rosie. Rosie's smile belies her dreaming state. Merritt is already awake, his eyes open staring at the ceiling, his right arm under Rosie's head. His hand rests on the night stand nearby.

There's a knock on the door.

Merritt pushes Rosie's head gently from his arm. Her thick hair goes up onto the pillow behind her head as he pulls it free.

He gets up, pulls his underwear on and walks to the door just as another knock makes it clear their guest won't be leaving.

Merritt opens the door to see Marshal Ludermain.

The Marshal doesn't look surprised.

WADE LUDERMAIN

John Merritt, I need ya' ta' come with me to the office. I just need ta' ask ya' a few questions 'bout last night.

Merritt breathes in heavy, blinks his eyes a few times, and then wipes them of sleep. Finally, he pushes the door nearly shut, grabs his shirt and slips it on as Rosie rises from the bed with a big yawn and stretch, the sheet falling off her breast as she does.

JOHN MERRITT

The Marshal wants to take me in for questioning.

Rosie smiles broad and walks over to stand in front of him as he pulls on his pants.

ROSIE SANDERSON

Will you be comin' back ta'night?

She lays a fresh kiss on his lips, and he leans into it to be sure she's not the only one trying.

JOHN MERRITT

If Rayanne will let me.

...he finally manages after they finish.

She breathes out a half-laugh and allows him to slip into his boots while he zips up.

He walks out of the room and down the stairs behind the Marshal while buttoning his shirt.

Rayanne is downstairs, already preparing for another day; no patrons in sight. She nods his direction as he passes by, and he notices, nodding back.

CUT TO:

INT. KANSAS TOWN MARSHAL'S OFFICE - DAY

The door bell rings as the door opens and Marshal Ludermain's huge frame fills the door. He walks in followed by Merritt, and as we get a wider view of the room, we see another man standing in the corner on the left, his arms folded across his chest.

This other man is about 5'6", 180 lbs., and a black top hat to match his black clothing. It's not really a suit, just a shirt and pants, but he practically blends into the shadows.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Have a seat, Merritt. This here is Mortimer Randal. He's the local barber, doctor, and mortician. He's also a rather learn-ed man, so I know the two of you will be able ta' communicate with each other, as I didn't ne'er finish secon' grade.

MORTIMER RANDAL takes a brief moment to size up Merritt, steps forward as Merritt seats himself across from the Marshal who just finished leaning back in his chair and resting his long legs on his desk. Mortimer sits on the edge of the desk just in front of Marshal's boots.

MORTIMER RANDAL

I understand you rode into town last night.

Merritt nods his head.

MORTIMER RANDAL

I can't hear your head rattle, dude.

JOHN MERRITT

Yes, I rode into town last night.

MORTIMER RANDAL

Don't you find that a tad bit odd? These deaths have been keeping the Marshal and I up most nights trying to find some clues. Do you know what we found?

JOHN MERRITT

Well, I'm going to go out on a limb and guess another dead body.

Mortimer looks back at the Marshal.

MORTIMER RANDAL

We got ourselves a live one, here,
Marshal...

(This to Merritt)

Mr. Merritt, you came in from the
East side, I hear.

JOHN MERRITT

That's correct, sir.

MORTIMER RANDAL

Now you call me "sir..." So, Mr.
Merritt, what brought you into
town?

JOHN MERRITT

I heard there were some jobs up
here to have. I'm running out of
money pretty fast, what with all
the stops I've made between
Springfield and here...

Mortimer's eyes come alive...

MORTIMER RANDAL

Springfield... Springfield,
Missouri?

JOHN MERRITT

The self-same.

MORTIMER RANDAL

How long were you in Springfield?

JOHN MERRITT

A little over a year. Took up some
time with a few ladies, and a made
a friend or two.

MORTIMER RANDAL

You wanna tell me how you got to be
so well-spoken, Mr. Merritt?

JOHN MERRITT

Not particularly, but I'll tell you
anyway.

(he pauses a moment)

I went to West Point right out of
school, graduated with honors, and
joined up with the Union army
during the war between the North
and South as a first Lieutenant,
and came out a Colonel.

Mortimer thinks about this for a moment.

MORTIMER RANDAL
Ah! So it's Colonel Merritt, is it
... do you have any kids?

Merritt frowns and looks away a second, then back,

JOHN MERRITT
Yeah ... I sure do.

MORTIMER RANDALL
What's his name?

JOHN MERRITT
"Her" name is Annabelle.

MORTIMER RANDAL
Where's she at?

Merritt breathes in hard and sighs loud. He slaps his leg with a half-fisted right hand.

JOHN MERRITT
She's with her grandparents in
Ohio.

MORTIMER RANDAL
Where's momma?

JOHN MERRITT
Ran off with some rich guy from
Virginia. Haven't seen her in five
years, thank the good Lord.

Mortimer can tell there's more, and his face gives way to determining a different line of questioning. He stands up and walks the opposite direction for just a few steps and turns back to face his audience.

MORTIMER RANDAL
Mr. Merritt, when you were at West
Point, or in the Union Army, did
you ever take anatomy? Did you
learn about the human body, and how
things work?

JOHN MERRITT

Naturally. Don't know anyone who's had schooling at a college who didn't have to take a handful of anatomy or biology courses, much less anyone in the military who didn't have to do some first-aid out on the battlefield at least a dozen times.

MORTIMER RANDAL

That's true. Mr. Merritt, what can you tell me about a body that's been strangled to death?

Merritt gets a look of uncertainty about his inquisitor's direction with this, and slowly says

JOHN MERRITT

It doesn't take long for a body to succumb to asphyxiation ... just a matter of seconds, in fact. The face usually turns blue from the blood vessels being unable to return blood to the heart. Eventually, the body gives out without oxygen.

MORTIMER RANDAL

That's right. So, exactly what part of the body is the most important, would you say?

JOHN MERRITT

Well, I'd say the heart, would be my guess. A body can live without legs, arms, and a few internal organs, but you remove the heart, the head's got nothing to survive on.

Mortimer nods his head with his hand to his face, his other hand holding up the elbow of the first.

MORTIMER RANDAL

That's correct, Mr. Merritt. I'd have to agree. So, let me just lay this out for you.

(He drops his hands behind his back)

(MORE)

MORTIMER RANDAL (cont'd)
 Those three women who were killed
 in the last two weeks were
 strangled, slit from belly button
 to neck, and their internal organs
 were removed and laid neatly on
 napkins. Care to take a guess as
 to which of the organs were gone
 from all three subjects?

A somber look crosses Merritt's face, and he becomes noticeably concerned.

JOHN MERRITT
 The heart...?

There's commotion outside on the walkway - a woman and a young man passing by the window - as Mortimer looks at Merritt and finishes

MORTIMER RANDAL
 Marshal, I think we should lock
 this man up until we've got more
 concrete evidence.

As he completes his sentence, the door opens with the sound of the bell once more and a young man in his late teens to early twenties is pushed through followed closely by a woman a good twenty years his elder.

CINDY SADDLER looks to her left and sees Merritt, but turns to the Marshal.

CINDY SADDLER
 Go ahead, Mikey! Tell'im. Tell'im
 what ya' told me!

The young male looks about to break, cowering with his arms up close to his chest, hands bent in awkward directions, his head moving in unnerving ways.

MIKEY SADDLER looks at his mother and shakes his head.

CINDY SADDLER
 If you ain't gonna tell'im, I will!
 Now, talk, or I'll beat it outta
 ya'!

Mikey looks at the Marshal and finally stumbles over the words

MIKEY SADDLER
 I - I - I heard - heard Miz - Miz -
 Miz Harkwood di-di-di-died last
 night, Ma - Marshal.

WADE LUDERMAIN

That's correct, son.
 (feet off his desk,
 leaning over it)
 What do you know about it?

MIKEY SADDLER

I was - was - was wid' Miz - Miz -
 Miz Harkwood last - last - last
 night, Marshal.

The Marshal looks up at the mom with some consternation.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Mikey ... you were with Miss
 Harkwood before she died?

MIKEY SADDLER

Yes'r - yes'r - yesir.

CINDY SADDLER

Yeah! Tell the good Marshal
 whatcha was doin' with Miz
 Harkwood, boy!

MIKEY SADDLER

She wa - she wa - she said she was
 teachin' - teachin' - teachin' me
 ta' be a ma - man...

The Marshal reaches a hand up to cover his mouth as his eyes close. When he finally drops his hand slowly down, he looks Mikey in the eye.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Mikey, are you sayin' you an' her
 had a relationship?

MIKEY SADDLER

No - no - no sir. She - she - she
 said we was havin' se - se - sex.

Cindy hauls off and hits her son with her purse.

CINDY SADDLER

Marshal, I don't know where he
 learnt that kind'a talk from, but I
 assure you ...

The Marshal reaches a hand her direction to calm her, as if it were possible.

WADE LUDERMAIN

It's alright, Mrs. Saddler. He probably learnt it from Miz Harkwood.

(this to Mikey)

Now, son, this is mighty important. Did you see her with anyone else last night after you left? Was there anyone else with her when you were there?

Mikey swallows hard.

MIKEY SADDLER

No - nosir - nosir.

CINDY SADDLER

He's brought shame to our house, Marshal! We'll ne'er be able to step foot inside the church again! He's a damned fool, he is!

WADE LUDERMAIN

Now, now, Mrs. Saddler, there's no need to be that way.

(to Mikey)

Mikey, why don't you go outside and sit on the porch a spell and let us grown-ups chat, huh?

Mikey walks outside, cowering to the glare of his mother.

After Mikey is out of earshot, the Marshal says

WADE LUDERMAIN

Mrs. Saddler, the boy ain't got nothin' in his head. He was just doin' what Miz Harkwood as'ed I'm sure. We had a notion she was up to no good at nights. I've had more than one report of her sleepin' with some other men in the town.

CINDY SADDLER

But, Marshal, she was such a good woman. She was at church e'ery Sunday mornin', gave to the plate, taught most o' my children plumb up from ferth grade to grajiation. She weren't no lady o' the night!

WADE LUDERMAIN

I'm afraid yer' wrong, Mrs. Saddler. Now, yer' boy out there ain't smart 'nough to know no better. You take him home and tell him he ain't ta' be sleepin' with no more women again, an' I'm willin' ta' bet he won't. He's a good kid. All yer' kids are.

Cindy stares down the Marshal -

CINDY SADDLER

I may be takin' him home, Marshal, but you an' me both know Satan's draggin' him ta' hell fer this! Tha's what the good book says...

The three men watch Cindy walk out the door and hear her as she begins yelling once more at her son. She can be seen through the window grabbing his ear and pulling him along through the street, the young man cowering and swiping insufficiently at his mother's rage.

The Marshal makes his way back to his chair and sits.

JOHN MERRITT

Well, Marshal, it seems we've got a modus operandi.

WADE LUDERMAIN

A what?

After asking, he looks up at Mortimer.

MORTIMER RANDAL

It means "mode of operations," Marshal. It seems our murderer only kills prostitutes.

A look of realization crosses the Marshal's face.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Oh.

(to Merritt)

Didn't I see Rosie in yer' room at Rayanne's this mornin'?

Merritt smiles and nods,

JOHN MERRITT

Yes, sir. If I was going around
killing prostitutes, you wouldn't
have seen her up and walking about,
now, would you?

Mortimer thinks long and hard.

MORTIMER RANDAL

He's got a good point, Marshal.

WADE LUDERMAIN

I know he does.

(BEAT - slams his fist
down on the table)

Damn it! Alright, we'll letcha go,
fer now, Mr. Merritt, but I don't
wantcha leavin' town, still.

Merritt stands up

JOHN MERRITT

Didn't have any notion to, Marshal.
Got any idea where I can get a good
job ... maybe make a couple
dollars?

The Marshal looks away a second with a frustrated sigh and

WADE LUDERMAIN

The blacksmith just north o' here
said he was lookin' ta' hire a
hand. Go talk to him and tell him
I sentcha.

JOHN MERRITT

Very kind of you, Marshal. We'll
be in touch, I've no doubt.

We see Merritt walk out the door and off the porch into the
sunlight heading to the "Dusty Dudes" Saloon where he unties
his horse, gets on, and rides it north as the two continue:

MORTIMER RANDAL

I don't like it, Marshal. This
whole thing wrecks of dirty socks,
and while I don't really have a
good reason to suspect Merritt...

Wade interrupts

WADE LUDERMAIN

I know, Mortimer. I agree.
Merritt's hidin' somethin'. I
don't think he did it, but I
suspect he may've somethin' he
ain't tellin' us.

He stands up from his chair

WADE LUDERMAIN

(CONTINUED)

Keep an eye on him when you have
the opportunity. I'm gonna go have
a chat with the blacksmith and ask
him to do the same.

MORTIMER RANDAL

Good idea, Marshal. I've got work
to get done, still. I'd best be
getting back to it.

The two nod at each other and Mortimer exits the Marshal's
office.

Marshal Ludermain walks to the window to watch Merritt
continue riding north, and soon sees him getting off his
horse at the farriery.

WADE LUDERMAIN

What're you really doin' in this
town, Merritt?

CUT TO:

INT. KANSAS TOWN, BLACKSMITH BARN - LATE MORNING

Merritt gets off Annabelle, ties her up to a nearby post, and
walks through the East door into the blacksmith's barn - a
rickety old door that probably should have had the hinges
replaced ten years ago, and which itself is badly in need of
new wood.

He has to walk around a small wooden wall and a couple of
barrels on his right and in front of him, but he can plainly
see the Blacksmith at his fire hammering away at a horseshoe.
Next to the horse that is ready to receive the said horseshoe
is a beautiful young woman in her mid-twenties with a
gorgeous corset and a lovely bonnet pulled over her head,
hair dangling out the back about down to her lumbar region.

He can clearly hear her over the sound of the hammering

LORRAINE RANDALL

T'seems you got a visitor, Mr. Ray-
sher.

Her voice is high, and her drawl weighs of deep south.

As Merritt gets closer, LORRAINE smiles wide at him.

MARCUS RESCHER stops what he's doing and pulls up a glass
faceplate to see the person behind him.

Marcus is young. His outfit belies his calm, happy demeanor.
He is quick to put down his smith's hammer and pull off a
glove to offer his hand to Merritt.

MARCUS RESCHER

Hi. I'm Marcus. Marcus Rescher.
You are...?

A big happy grin crosses his face, but of a curt kind, and
much less like the one pasted to Lorraine's.

JOHN MERRITT

John Merritt. I'm from out of
town. Marshal tells me you're
looking for some assistance.

Lorraine unnecessarily clears her throat.

Merritt and Marcus both turn to her. Marcus makes a quick
motion of introduction

MARCUS RESCHER

John Merritt, this is Lorraine
Randall.

Merritt's eyebrows go up.

JOHN MERRITT

Randall. That last name sounds
familiar. Are you related to the
barber-mortician gentleman?

Lorraine puts her hands behind her back and twists at the
waist. Her teeth go over her bottom lip for just a second or
so

LORRAINE RANDALL

I'm his niece.

She blinks a few times at him as she puts an arm out toward
him.

Merritt takes her hand and kisses the back of it gently

JOHN MERRITT

A pleasure to meet you, Ms.
Randall.

She seems almost to take offense at this.

LORRAINE RANDALL

Oh, please, no formality.
(a fresh smile)
It's just Lorraine.

That strong accent shines through most as she says her own name.

JOHN MERRITT

Then, a pleasure to meet you,
Lorraine.

(BEAT)

(back to Marcus)

Marcus, I'm looking for a job. The
Marshal sent me over and I was
hoping...

MARCUS RESCHER

Say no more, John Merritt from out
o' town. You're har'd. Ya' can
start by movin' them thar' hay
bails up to the loft.

Merritt nods

JOHN MERRITT

I appreciate it, Marcus.

MARCUS RESCHER

That's Mr. Rescher to you.

He says it in good humor. Merritt smiles and nods, walks over to the hay bails and begins throwing them up the ten feet or so to the nearly-empty loft.

Lorraine is noticeably watching Merritt as Marcus goes back to what he was doing.

Finally, she can take it no longer and walks over to the strong man throwing hay bails.

LORRAINE RANDALL

Well, Mr. Merritt...

Merritt stops with a hay bail in his hands and turns to her.

JOHN MERRITT
Well, what, Ms. ... Er, Lorraine.

LORRAINE RANDALL
So, you've met my uncle. What do you think of him?

Merritt throws the bail up to the loft, bends down to grab another and speaks at her, rather than to her

JOHN MERRITT
He seems like a nice enough man. He's got a great education...very intelligent. I prefer my interaction with other men to be educated and intelligent.

...and throws it. She smiles, though he cannot see it.

LORRAINE RANDALL
I do, too.
(BEAT)
You seem (breath) ej'acated an' intel'gent.

Another bail

JOHN MERRITT
That's me, Lorraine. Educated and intelligent to the hilt.

Toss.

As he moves his arms up, his shirt lifts up, and she happens to glance down to his bare back. A large scar is clearly seen on his right side.

She raises her hands to her mouth as she inhales,

LORRAINE RANDALL
Oh, my!
(she looks up at him)
What happened to your side?

He turns back to her, realizing he's not going to get much work done until she's gone, or at least satisfied. He can see Mr. Rescher hammering the shoe on the horse's front left hoof.

JOHN MERRITT
I was injured in the war.

She looks surprised.

LORRAINE RANDALL

The war...?

JOHN MERRITT

Yeah. The one our country had about ten years ago between the North and the South?

LORRAINE RANDALL

Mr. Merritt, don't take me for a fool. I knows we had us a war. I was in Go'ja when that was goin' on. Which side was you on?

JOHN MERRITT

I was in the Union army, Lorraine.

She frowns, a deep furrow in her brows

LORRAINE RANDALL

Djoo e'er pass through Atlanta, Go'ja?

He thinks for a long moment.

JOHN MERRITT

I don't think there's a city in Georgia that I didn't at least pass through.

Lorraine is obviously still harboring some intense feelings about this and

LORRAINE RANDALL

Well, then, good day to you, sir.

Her smile completely gone, she practically stomps off.

As Merritt now continues to throw hay bails up onto the loft, he can clearly overhear her say to Marcus

LORRAINE RANDALL (V.O.)

If yer' done with that there shoe, I'll be on my way, Mr. Raysher.

MARCUS RESCHER (V.O.)

I'm done, Miss Randall. Have a nice day, now, ya' hear?

There's no word from the miss as the sound of Marcus helping her up onto her horse is heard, and the sound of the horse trotting away, followed finally by the footsteps of Marcus walking Merritt's direction and stopping not far away.

MARCUS RESCHER

So, yer' a Union man?

JOHN MERRITT

I served my country. I did what I was told. A man can't regret that.

MARCUS RESCHER

I wasn't askin' ya' to.

(as Merritt turns to face him)

I admire men who serve our nation, and ta' be quite honest, I was rootin' fer the north. You ain't ne'er goin'a get me ta' believe nobody should be servin' no one else just because they's black.

JOHN MERRITT

Is that all anyone thinks that war was about...? What a shame?

MARCUS RESCHER

That is what that silly war was about, an' don't you forget it!

JOHN MERRITT

It wasn't about blacks. It was about slavery. No man should be enslaved to another. It's the right of all men to be free, regardless of their color.

Marcus looks away a brief moment

MARCUS RESCHER

Yer' right, Mr. Merritt. I guess you got a good point thar'...

Merritt turns and begins tossing bails up.

Marcus clears his throat as he pulls off his gloves.

MARCUS RESCHER

When yer' done thar', I got some cleanin' up fer ya' ta' do, but it'll take ya' a while here, so I'll be back in a bit. Gotta' run ta' the store and fetch a few things.

Without turning around again

JOHN MERRITT

I'll be here when you get back, Mr.
Rescher.

CUT TO:

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, OUTSIDE BLACKSMITH'S BARN - DAY

Marcus exits out the horses' entrance and heads toward the main street. As he nears the wooden porch that extends along the west side of shops the Marshal catches up with him.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Marcus ... Marcus ...

Marcus stops after the second attempt of his name and turns.

MARCUS RESCHER

Ah, Marshal ... a man came by an'
said you sent him to me fer some
work.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Yeah, that was me.

The Marshal pulls the man along onto the porch and the two proceed to walk together.

MARCUS RESCHER

I put him to work right away.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Great! Look, Marcus; Mortimer an'
I're tryin' to keep an eye on this
fella'. We have our doubts, but he
may have somethin' ta' do with this
string o' murders. I sent him to
ya' 'cause yer' the closest job in
town where I can do that from my
office.

MARCUS RESCHER

Well, Marshal, I ain't got no nose
for sleuthin' like you and
Mortimer. I'm just a simple
blacksmith.

WADE LUDERMAIN

I ain't askin' ya' ta' do nothin'
ya' ain't good at. Stick with yer
smithin' and Mortimer an' I'll
stick to our sleuthin'.

(MORE)

WADE LUDERMAIN (cont'd)
 I jes' wancha ta' let me or
 Mortimer know if he does somethin'
 suspicious.

MARCUS RESCHER
 Suspicious...? Ya' mean like
 killin' somebody?

The Marshal almost laughs.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 Nah. I jes' meant if he takes the
 day off early, 'er sneaks out, or
 somethin' like that.

Marcus stops, turns to the Marshal, and nods

MARCUS RESCHER
 I un'erstan' Marshal. I'll do my
 best.

The Marshal stops with him, gives him a good pat on the right
 shoulder and says

WADE LUDERMAIN
 I know ya' will, Marcus. I know
 ya' will...

The Marshal leaves him to do his work and heads off across
 the street.

Marcus' eyes follow the Marshal for a few moments, and then
 glances up at another fellow across the street who's looking
 at him. They nod at each other, and Marcus goes inside a
 nearby store.

FADE TO:

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, OUTSIDE BLACKSMITH'S BARN - EVENING

Marcus is closing up his barn for the night, lets Merritt
 exit the main entrance to a

MARCUS RESCHER
 Good night, Merritt. See ya' in
 the mornin'.

JOHN MERRITT
 Yes, sir, Mr. Rescher. I'll be
 here.

...and Merritt unties Annabelle, gets on, and rides her south, back toward

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE DUSTY DUDES SALOON - EVENING

...as Merritt rides up to the saloon. He gets off, ties Annabelle up, and starts to walk up the rickety steps once more before he notices the man in the black suit and black Stetson.

The man pushes his back off the wooden post only a few feet away and walks up to Merritt before he can get up the stairs.

ROBERT WILSON
Back fer more, hey, Merritt?

Merritt looks perturbed as Wilson continues

ROBERT WILSON
You an' I have unfinished biz'ness.

JOHN MERRITT
There's no unfinished business
between us.

ROBERT WILSON
Oh, I believe there is.

Wilson makes a kick at Merritt, but Merritt is already expecting something, grabs the man's foot in mid-kick and twists it around to the left, effectively turning the man over onto his face on the porch.

Wilson is hurt, but more his pride as he stands up with a sly smile.

ROBERT WILSON
I betcha' can't do that again.

JOHN MERRITT
We'll see...

Wilson throws a punch, but Merritt catches it with his left hand, swings a fist to that arm and we hear a SNAP. Wilson grabs the arm with his right hand and bends at the waist.

ROBERT WILSON
You mother ...
(grunt)
YOU BROKE MY ARM!

JOHN MERRITT

I'm about to break more than that
if you don't get out of my way,
boy.

Despite the pain, Wilson ducks his head and runs at Merritt to ram him, but Merritt pulls to one side with his right arm out, catches Wilson by the neck with his forearm, sweeps his right leg from in front of himself back toward Wilson's legs and completely clotheslines him and drops him to the ground.

Wilson hits dirt with a broken arm, and a wicked cough from his throat. Wilson brings his right hand up around his neck as he gasps for air.

JOHN MERRITT

You don't learn too well, do you,
Mr. Wilson?

Wilson shakes his head, still coughing and gasping for air as Merritt gets up a stride and walks into the saloon without looking back.

CUT TO:

INT. DUSTY DUDES SALOON - EVENING

Merritt makes his way to the bar and sits down in front of Rayanne who is helping another customer.

After filling the mug with beer and slamming it down in front of the man, she looks at Merritt.

RAYANNE POTTER

Another beer?

JOHN MERRITT

Please, and if you got something to
eat, I'm starving.

She smiles.

RAYANNE POTTER

All I gots is spirits, Mr. Merritt.
Ya' want a meal, yer gonna have to
go to a rest'rawnt.

JOHN MERRITT

Any open this time of evening?

RAYANNE POTTER
There's one nearby, jes' a few
doors down on yer' right.

Merritt shakes his head.

JOHN MERRITT
I'll be back in a little bit for
that beer.

He gets off the stool and

CUT TO:

EXT. DUSTY DUDES SALOON, PORCH - EVENING

walks out the door, (no sign of Wilson), heads west a ways
and stops at a place with lights on and customers seated near
a window.

Merritt walks through the door and...

CUT TO:

INT. SADDLED COW RESTAURANT - EVENING

...sits down at a table.

A moment later an older woman is at his side with a tablet.

WAITRESS
What can I get ya', Sir?

JOHN MERRITT
What do you have?

WAITRESS
Well, we've got steaks, hamburgers,
deer stew, beef stew, chicken, corn-
on-the-cob, smash' taters...

He stops her with

JOHN MERRITT
I'll take a hamburger, and some
smashed potatoes.

WAITRESS
What'll ya' have ta' drink, Mr.?

JOHN MERRITT
Nothing right now, thanks.

The waitress walks away and places the order while Merritt takes stock of the room. No one recognizable.

Shortly, though, the Marshal walks in and seats himself across from Merritt at the table.

JOHN MERRITT
Well, hello there, Marshal.

The Marshal nods, leans back in his chair facing off to Merritt's left, hangs his left arm on the table and taps it with his fingers.

WADE LUDERMAIN
Hello, Merritt. How'd yer' first
day o' work go at the farriery?

Merritt nods his head as the WAITRESS comes out with her tablet and stands in front of the Marshal.

WAITRESS
What can I get fer ya', Marshal?

WADE LUDERMAIN
I'll have whate'er the gen'leman's
havin' ta' eat...
(he gestures at Merritt)
...and some sweeten' tea.

WAITRESS
Very good, Marshal. We'll be
havin' that right out ta' ya' soon.

She smiles and walks away.

Merritt's eyes are on the Marshal, who doesn't seem to notice; but then the Marshal looks up at the other.

WADE LUDERMAIN
Seems you been noticed in this
town.

Merritt looks off a second, and back

JOHN MERRITT
Not that hard for a man like me,
Marshal.

WADE LUDERMAIN
You beat the heck outta' Wilson.

JOHN MERRITT

He started it.

WADE LUDERMAIN

I didn't say you did nothin' wrong. He's always stickin' his nose in where it don't belong, and gettin' way in o'er his head. He's got a big mouth, and I'm glad somebody shut him up.

JOHN MERRITT

Even if that person was me...?

WADE LUDERMAIN

I didn't say nothin' 'bout that, Merritt.

JOHN MERRITT

I have a gut feeling you didn't come in here to thank me for beating the heck out of the town delinquent.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Are you kiddin'? I came in here to eat. You're the first person I saw as I was walkin' up, thought I'd sit with ya' and get to know ya'.

JOHN MERRITT

What would you like to know, Marshal?

WADE LUDERMAIN

Well, a West Point grajiate, ex-Colonel ... yer' wife ran off with another man, and ya' ain't takin' care o' yer daughter...

Merritt gets upset quick

JOHN MERRITT

I didn't say I wasn't taking care of my daughter!

The Marshal pulls his hands up in surrender.

JOHN MERRITT

I mail her money every chance I get through the postal service.

WADE LUDERMAIN
My apologies, Merritt. I didn't
realize...

JOHN MERRITT
I know, Marshal.
(bends his head down)
I miss her...

WADE LUDERMAIN
Yer daughter ... Annabelle?

JOHN MERRITT
Yeah.
(looks back up)
I miss her a lot.

WADE LUDERMAIN
Why doncha' go back to her?

Merritt looks away for a bit, shakes his head, and finally

JOHN MERRITT
I've got to pull myself together,
first, Marshal. Ever since my wife
left me...
(BEAT)
Ever since my wife left me, it's
been hard. I tried for a couple
years to raise her myself, but...it
was hard, you know?

WADE LUDERMAIN
Raisin' up childern is always hard,
Merritt ... but it's somethin' we
fathers gotta do. It's our God-
given responsibility.

The waitress exits the back with the orders and brings them
out effectively stalling the conversation.

WAITRESS
Will there be anythin' else, gents?

The both answer negatively, and as she leaves

JOHN MERRITT
What about you, Marshal? How many
kids do you have?

Merritt grabs his hamburger and chomps down a huge bite. The
Marshal grabs his own, but holds it there in front of his
mouth

WADE LUDERMAIN

I got four at home. The misses an'
I work hard to make sure they have
everythin' we ne'er had when we was
kids.

JOHN MERRITT

Very admirable, Marshal...

Merritt says through food-stuffed mouth.

WADE LUDERMAIN

You always talk with yer mouth
full?

Merritt takes another bite and says

JOHN MERRITT

Only when I'm extra-hungry ... and
I'm extra-hungry.

WADE LUDERMAIN

A hard days' labor'll do that, ya'
know...

JOHN MERRITT

So will not eating in three days...

The two men laugh and continue to eat.

There's a brief lull in the conversation, and then commotion
outside. Merritt moves his head over to his right a bit to
see some men walking forward.

The Marshal hears it as well and turns his head to see what
Merritt is looking at ... it seems like there's a lynching
crowd outside, and heading it up is none other than

MORTIMER RANDALL (O.C.)

MARSHAL!

The door opens and we see him walk in. The other men remain
outside.

WADE LUDERMAIN

What is it, Mortimer?

MORTIMER RANDALL

It's another one of those murders
... the same kind, sir.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 (glancing briefly at
 Merritt)
 Who, now?

Mortimer shakes his head.

MORTIMER RANDALL
 It's Rosie... Found her behind the
 Smith's barn.

Mortimer and the Marshal both look at Merritt, who's more shocked than they, and he swallows hard before looking back at his hamburger, no longer hungry.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 How long you think she's been dead,
 Mortimer?

MORTIMER RANDALL
 No longer than an hour, sir. Maybe
 less.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 (to Merritt)
 Yer under arrest for suspicion of
 murder, John Merritt.

The Marshal stands up, grabs a pair of cuffs, and allows Merritt to stand up on his own. Merritt puts his hands behind his back as he's cuffed.

The Marshal and Mortimer walk Merritt outside to the small crowd of about eight men all ready to hang the man in cuffs.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 Now, men...
 (trying to calm the crowd)
 He's only under suspicion. We
 ain't got no proof jes' yet.

LYNCHMAN #1
 Marshal, who else could it be?

LYNCHMAN #2
 Yeah, Marshal! We ain't got no one
 else under suspicion...

MORTIMER RANDALL
 Men, if the Marshal says he's only
 under suspicion, he has his
 reasons. Now, all of you just go
 on home.

The men slowly turn and walk away toward their homes while Mortimer and the Marshal walk Merritt across the street to the Marshal's office.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. MARSHAL'S OFFICE JAIL CELL - MORNING

Merritt sits on a well-worn cot, his back against the wall, the mattress and pillow both yellowed with age and use, looking like they've never been washed in their collective lifetimes. Merritt looks like he could use a washing as well.

The sunlight pilfers through the bars on a window, through the bars of the jail cell next to his, and finally onto his face and bare chest.

His eyes are closed, and if he's asleep, he makes no sound of it. He's neither smiling nor frowning. His hair is badly mussed, and there's no way of telling if he slept on the cot sitting up or lying down.

A long moment passes before the door to the office opens with its familiar bell-ringing...the sound of boots hitting the floorboards in a pattern letting us know the door is being closed (again to the ringing of a bell), and the sound of those same boots walking this direction.

WADE LUDERMAIN (O.C.)
 (stepping into frame,
 O.S.)
 Breakfast!

Merritt's eyes open slow.

JOHN MERRITT
 How nice of you, Marshal.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 Ya' wan'it or not?

Merritt gets up, walks to the bars and holds out his hand.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 How'd ya' sleep?

The Marshal pushes the plate of bacon, eggs, and a buscuit through the tray opening.

JOHN MERRITT
I don't remember sleeping, Marshal.

WADE LUDERMAIN
Uncomfortable?

JOHN MERRITT
Thinking about Rosie...

WADE LUDERMAIN
Guilty conscience?

JOHN MERRITT
Planning on having her a second
night in a row, you know. She was
a good girl, Marshal. She had a
good heart. She didn't deserve
that kind of death...

We see the Marshal step back and lean against the opposite
wall, fold his arms, and

WADE LUDERMAIN
Funny you should say "heart..."

JOHN MERRITT
I said it with intent, Marshal;
nothing funny about it.

Merritt takes a bite of bacon.

WADE LUDERMAIN
For what it's worth, I don' believe
you did it.

Still chewing on the thin strip of bacon in his mouth,

JOHN MERRITT
Neither do I.
(swallow)
What do you suppose a man would
want with a bunch of hearts,
Marshal?

Wade Ludermain's frame pushes itself from the wall, arms
still folded. He seems imposing for a brief moment, but his
demeanor's all wrong.

WADE LUDERMAIN
The heart has importance'n many
societies, I've heard tell...
(MORE)

WADE LUDERMAIN (cont'd)
 I read that the Egyptians remove'
 the hearts before the bodies was
 ... emba...

A short silence.

JOHN MERRITT
 Embalmed?

WADE LUDERMAIN
 That's the word. It was sacred, or
 somethin' like that.

JOHN MERRITT
 You know, Marshal, I keep thinking
 of all kinds of old sayings about
 the heart ... 'Home is where the
 heart is' ... 'Give Jesus your
 heart' ... 'Have a heart' ...
 'Where your heart is, there your
 treasure will be' ... Maybe
 someone's taking those sayings...

Merritt almost laughs at himself for almost saying it.

The Marshal shakes his head.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 No, Merritt. I jes' think we got
 ourselves a cold-blooded murderer.
 I ain't ne'er imagin' no one goin'
 around murderin' a bunch o'
 beautiful women. If it's a case o'
 like yer talkin', they ain't gonna
 come quotin' no Bible verses or
 cute sayin's. No, sir, they're
 gonna come spoutin' prideful-like
 if they come at all.

JOHN MERRITT
 You could be right, Marshal.

The Marshal drops his arms.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 Eatcher breakfast 'fore it gets
 cold. I got work ta' do.

Merritt turns, sits down and begins to eat.

We hear the Marshal's boot steps to the door, an exit, and
 Merritt's left alone to eat, the sunlight having shifted down
 a few degrees.

We watch for a few moments Merritt eating, and then the office door opens again, more boots on the floorboard, but different this time.

ROBERT WILSON (O.C.)
 (stepping into frame,
 O.S.)
 Well, now, it looks like the boot's
 on the other foot.

Merritt looks up, but continues to eat.

JOHN MERRITT
 You got a problem, there, cowboy?

ROBERT WILSON
 Jes' came to see me the murderer
 what's been slippin' through town
 at night.

JOHN MERRITT
 I hope you got yourself some strong
 evidence to back that accusation
 up, Mister.

ROBERT WILSON
 Woowee! Listen at you, usin' them
 big fancy words up again! Now I
 knows you got somethin' ta' do with
 them there murders. Only a smooth-
 talkin' son-of-a-gun like you's got
 enough brains to go killin' pretty
 little helpless gems like Rosie!

The plate of food drops to the floor as Merritt stands up and moves to the bars quick, but not quick enough.

Wilson is standing just outside of Merritt's reach.

Laughing,

ROBERT WILSON
 Well, at least I still know you
 got's that hot temper on ya'. I
 got half a mind to let ya' out o'
 them bars so we can meet on the
 street.

JOHN MERRITT
 You got half a mind ... I got a
 whole one. Let me out of here and
 I'll show you all about meeting on
 the street...

Wilson turns around to walk away, takes a few steps, and turns back to look at Merritt under the rim of his hat.

ROBERT WILSON
You ain't so big and bad when you
cain't touch me, now, ar'ya...?

Merritt hits a bar with an open palm ... with his breath heavy, the bar vibrates for a long moment.

ROBERT WILSON
That's what I thought. Yer bark's
worse'n yer bite. I could take
ya'.

JOHN MERRITT
Not even sober, Wilson.

Wilson laughs it off quietly, turns, and exits the office.

Merritt looks at the rest of his food on the dusty floor and sighs hard and loud.

CUT TO:

INT. GENERAL STORE - AFTERNOON

Marshal Ludermain walks in, takes off his hat out of respect, nods to the manager who stands behind the cash register and nods back with a smile, and both go about their business.

The Marshal knows most of the people there, evidenced by his constant greetings of them, and them of him, with grins and understanding nods that seem to imply previous pleasant encounters.

Soon, we see Cindy Saddler (the woman who's son was with the teacher the night of the previous murder) standing at the jars of jelly and preserves.

The Marshal walks over to her.

CINDY SADDLER
(a cordial smile and nod)
Well, hello, Marshal.

WADE LUDERMAIN
(a nod back)
Mrs. Saddler...
(then)
Where're the youngen's?

She looks somewhat surprised, and finally,

CINDY SADDLER

Oh, the fair went to Wichita, so I sent them with some little extra money I saved up. They took the train yesterday afternoon.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Mikey went with 'em?

CINDY SADDLER

Yes, sir. I felt it'd be good fer him to get away. He was actin' all goofy after... Well, you know...

WADE LUDERMAIN

Yes'm. I know...

CINDY SADDLER

That po'r boy's groin' up a downright sinner, Marshal. I don't know what we's gonna do with'im.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Mrs. Saddler, sometimes the only thin' we can do is pray. The good reverend told us that last week.

CINDY SADDLER

That he did, Marshal. That he did.

She grabs a jar of strawberry preserves, places it in her basket, and walks away toward the counter embarrassed.

The Marshal looks after her for a second or two, and then goes about his business picking up a few items for the office: paper, a pen, and an ink well.

He is soon joined by

MORTIMER RANDALL

Marshal, I'm glad I found you.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Why is it that e'erywhere I go you seem to fin' me...?

Mortimer completely ignores the remark:

MORTIMER RANDALL

I was doing some figuring after I talked with Marcus this morning, and it seems him and Merritt were working together right up to closing time. Marcus let him out the front door. There was no time for...

WADE LUDERMAIN

I get it, Mortimer. An' what's more, I don' believe Merritt did it, either. Unfortuna'ly, we have no one else. I wanna keep Merritt locked up ... if nothin' else for to prove he's innocent.

MORTIMER RANDALL

(BEAT)

Good thinking, Marshal.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Don' be tellin' no one else what ya' learned, either. Let's let this fall inta' place.

MORTIMER RANDALL

Yes, Marshal.

WADE LUDERMAIN

An', seriously, Mortimer ... quit folla'in' me aroun'. People'll start thinkin' stuff.

The Marshal shakes his head and walks to the counter to wait in line, leaving Mortimer a bit dumbstruck.

CUT TO:

INT. MARSHAL'S OFFICE JAIL CELL - LATE MORNING

Marcus walks in with a harrumph toward Merritt.

MARCUS RESCHER

I told'em you didn' do it.

Merritt stands up and rushes to the cell door.

JOHN MERRITT

Are they going to let me out of here?

MARCUS RESCHER

I don' know. Mr. Randall seemed convinced, but he's gotta convince the Marshal, I guess. I could really use yer help o'er there.

Merritt looks like he just got handed the deed to property that turned out to be at the bottom of a lake.

JOHN MERRITT

(more to himself)

This day just keeps getting better.

(now to Marcus)

Well, it seems the 'innocent until proven guilty' concept was lost on Mortimer last night.

MARCUS RESCHER

That was last night, Merritt. He's had time ta' think it o'er, and he talked with me this mornin' so I'm bettin' you'll be out by the end o' the day.

...And it's at this moment that Wade Ludermain walks in...

WADE LUDERMAIN

Hello, Marcus.

MARCUS RESCHER

So, ya' gonna release Merritt?

WADE LUDERMAIN

I'm half-tempted to lock you up with'im.

Marcus gets a befuddled look on his face, and then a try at a laugh.

MARCUS RESCHER

You mus' be jokin', Marshal. I ... I ain't ne'er done nothin' to make ya' think I was no cold killer...

WADE LUDERMAIN

Maybe you was jus' waitin' fer the right opportunity. Now with Merritt behind bars, you're tryin' ta' bail yer partner-in-crime out so's you can go on a real spree...

Marcus, jaw dropped, now almost looks like he could faint.

MARCUS RESCHER

Mar... Marshal... Are you serious?

WADE LUDERMAIN

There's only one way to fin' out fer sure if yer both in on it. If I keep Merritt here, I betcha he won't be such a influence on ya', and we won't have us no more murders.

(BEAT)

Now, why doncha run on back ta' yer smithin' an' let me worry about Merritt...

Marcus practically runs out of the office. The Marshal's face follows him out with a grin unseen by the other.

JOHN MERRITT

What was that about, Marshal?

The Marshal looks up at Merritt from his seated position on the edge of his desk, paper bag of items in hand.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Here's the deal, Merritt. I still don' think ya' did it, an' I got 'nuff evidence to lead me ta' believe yer innocent. But folks in the town're all itchin' to find a scapegoat. That scapegoat's you. I wanna keep ya' locked up until another murder happens.

JOHN MERRITT

...And if another murder doesn't happen?

WADE LUDERMAIN

Then, I suppose we have ourselves the murderer, and you stay locked up until we can get enough evidence ta' convict ya'.

Merritt breathes out hard with a hand to his head.

JOHN MERRITT

Then, I'd like to make a request, Marshal.

WADE LUDERMAIN

I'm listenin'.

JOHN MERRITT
I'd like to take a look at the
latest victim.

WADE LUDERMAIN
That can be arranged...

CUT TO:

INT. MORTICIAN'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Mortimer stands over a covered body. Merritt and Wade stand on either side. Mortimer slowly uncovers the face. It's definitely Rosie, but her face is almost as white as the portion of the sheet that was over it. However, the rest of the sheet in the middle is completely blood-stained, and much of that portion is drooping into the carved-out cavity below her fairly large breast.

Mortimer pulls the sheet down further, uncovering her naked chest, slit from neck to navel, a strangle-mark around her neck.

The Marshal steps back a bit with his hand covering his mouth and nose.

Merritt moves forward a bit to look at the opening in her stomach.

JOHN MERRITT
Can I take a look at the organs
that were removed?

Mortimer walks over to a small table with another blood-stained cloth over it and brings it over next to Merritt.

MORTIMER RANDALL
I haven't moved anything. I left
the sheet exactly as it was last
night.

As this sheet is removed as well, Merritt looks at Mortimer.

JOHN MERRITT
May I borrow a set of gloves and
tongs, please?

Mortimer walks to a table, grabs the items and hands them to Merritt, who puts the gloves on, takes the tongs, and opens up the chest cavity.

A puff of light smoky substance goes up into the air. This time, all three step back, waving away at the stench that emanates from the decaying insides of the woman on the table.

Merritt opens the other half and peers inside, but finds nothing of interest to him.

Holding the back of his other hand near his nose and mouth

JOHN MERRITT

You say these organs were removed from her and placed on this sheet?

MORTIMER RANDALL

That's correct.

Merritt now looks at the table of entrails.

JOHN MERRITT

...And that every victim is being treated exactly the same?

MORTIMER RANDALL

Again correct...

JOHN MERRITT

What about the lungs?

MORTIMER RANDALL

What about them?

JOHN MERRITT

Why aren't the lungs being removed?

MORTIMER RANDALL

I'm not sure what you're getting at, Merritt?

JOHN MERRITT

Most of the internal organs: liver, stomach, large intestines, and the heart were removed. However, the fat tissue that surrounds the heart has only been cut away at. The heart was removed after the internal organs. That means that whoever is doing this is only interested in the heart...

MORTIMER RANDALL

That's right.

JOHN MERRITT

Mortimer, if someone's removing the heart so haphazardly, wouldn't they leave a trail of blood?

MORTIMER RANDALL

Not if they're putting it in a bag of some kind, or a jar...

JOHN MERRITT

Yeah, but a bloodhound could track a scent like that. You know anyone with a bloodhound?

MORTIMER RANDALL

A few folks; but by now, the trail's probably cold.

JOHN MERRITT

Not really. If it happens again, I would suggest you have one handy before you let the real culprit get away.

Mortimer looks over at the Marshal who looks like he's about to lose his internal organs any second.

MORTIMER RANDALL

Perhaps we'd better get the Marshal back to his office, and you to your cell for the time being.

CUT TO:

EXT. MARSHAL'S OFFICE - LATE AFTERNOON

Merritt is in cuffs on their way back.

It is painfully evident the Marshal tossed his lunch only a few moments ago. He still looks a little green.

As the trio makes it to the office, three young adults; two females and one male; are running across the street toward them. Not far behind, Mikey Saddler makes his way slowly with his usual scuffle, trying his best to keep up and failing.

SONNY SADDLER

Marshal! Marshal!

The two females also shout for him.

Once they arrive, and with Sonny out of breath, it is one of the young ladies first to speak up...

MARTHA SADDLER
 Marshal, yer not gonna believe
 this!

The Marshal manages to recover enough to look at her with something of a relaxed look on his face.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 Calm down, child'en. What is it?

Despite his term of endearment, none of the three are "children." All three of them are notably older than Mikey.

MARTHA SADDLER
 (breathing hard)
 Marshal, you'll ne'er ... While we
 was in Wichita, at the fair, there
 were two other murders, jus' like
 the ones here!

WADE LUDERMAIN
 (bewilderment)
 You mean, two exactly the same?

MARTHA SADDLER
 Yesir! Jus'zactly like'em, Sir.
 They had their insides removed and
 laid on' napkins. Their hearts
 were gone!

BERTHA-LYNN SADDLER
 No jokin', Marshal. She ain't
 lyin'.

MARTHA SADDLER
 No, sir. I wouldn' make that up.
 Promise!

The Marshal gets a look of grave concern on his face.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 Alright, child'en. Go home. Go
 let yer mamma know yuns is alright.

The four of them make nods with words of agreement, and the three oldest ones walk Mikey across the road.

Meanwhile, the Marshal turns to Mortimer and Merritt.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Well, Merritt... Seems you've done been vindicated. Whadda I do with ya', now?

JOHN MERRITT

First off, you can let me out of these cuffs.

The Marshal breathes out heavy with a nod to Mortimer to let him loose. Mortimer complies, and Merritt rubs his wrists.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Then what?

JOHN MERRITT

Simple. You let me go.

WADE LUDERMAIN

You know I cain't do that...

JOHN MERRITT

Sure you can, Marshal. It's real easy. I turn and walk away.

The Marshal stops him with an arm.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Now, jes' hold up a second, Merritt. I may know yer' not the killer, but we still need to find the real one...

JOHN MERRITT

That sounds like a job for the law. Not for a rider just passing through.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Then, I'll deputize ya'.

Merritt gets a smug look on his face.

JOHN MERRITT

...And after all the hospitality this town has had for me since I arrived two days ago, why the heck would I want to go and do that?

WADE LUDERMAIN

Ya' said ya' needed a job, didn' ya?

JOHN MERRITT

(short laugh, shake of the head)

Not that bad, Marshal. Not when it means my life could be on the line...

WADE LUDERMAIN

Yer life **was** on the line before we found out 'bout these Wichita murders. Stands ta' reason you'd wanna get some pay. I'm postin' a re-ward. Five thousan' greenbacks to the man what finds this murderer and brings'im in alive.

JOHN MERRITT

What's he worth to ya' dead?

WADE LUDERMAIN

From you? A hot meal and a nice soft bed for another night.

JOHN MERRITT

I'd rather have the money.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Then I need that bastard alive, Merritt. You in, or not?

Merritt sighs, looking off the direction of the children.

JOHN MERRITT

You're not going to stand in my way? You're going to let me do the job you're hiring me to do?

The Marshal just nods.

JOHN MERRITT

Can I round up a crew?

WADE LUDERMAIN

Nope. I'll do that fer ya'. I know the people in this town what can best help ya'. You don't.

Merritt shakes his head.

JOHN MERRITT

You drive a hard bargain, Marshal.

WADE LUDERMAIN

You can start right now. I gotcher horse tied up 'round behind the jail. Grab her and meet me in front of "Dusty Dudes" in a few minutes.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. IN FRONT OF "DUSTY DUDES" SALOON - EARLY EVENING

Merritt rides around the jailhouse on his horse toward the saloon he's grown accustomed to. It's several yards away, but he can see quite a crowd gathering up around the Marshal.

When he arrives, we are able to note two familiar faces in the crowd: Robert Wilson, with his arm bandaged up in a sling, and

RAYANNE POTTER

Well, now, John Merritt ... seems the town folks was wrong 'bout you.

She's carrying a .22 rifle, the barrel of which wrests on her right shoulder, and she's preparing to get onto a fairly large horse ... large enough to hold her frame.

Robert Wilson makes his way onto a horse as well.

JOHN MERRITT

No, no...
(looking at the Marshal)
Not him. He is NOT going with me.

The Marshal points up for just a second at Merritt with a smile and a knowing look,

WADE LUDERMAIN

I knew you'd say that, Merritt,
(hand down)
which is why I didn' let you pick yer own. Wilson may be a loud mouth son-of-a-gun, but he's a quick draw with one, and he'll do what he's told.

ROBERT WILSON

I ain't doin' nothin' that jackass tells me.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 (leaning in toward
 Merritt, hand covering
 his mouth)
 Ignore 'im. He likes ya'. Yer one
 o' the few to stand up to 'im.

JOHN MERRITT
 (this to Rayanne)
 Then why're you going with me.

RAYANNE POTTER
 They don' call me "Rough n' Ready
 Rayanne" fer nothin', ya' know!
 (turns her horse around to
 face Merritt)
 Rode with the best o' 'em in my
 hayday 'fore I settled down here in
 the beautiful town o' Kansas. I
 can shoot a flee off a dog's nose
 at one hundred paces.

JOHN MERRITT
 (more to himself)
 What happens to the dog?

If she hears him, she doesn't say anything.

WADE LUDERMAIN
 Well, off you three go. Oh, an' no
 quarrelin' while yer all out on the
 trail. You ain't got time fer it.
 I don' want no more murders goin'
 down, ya' hear?

JOHN MERRITT
 I can't promise that, Marshal, but
 we'll get your murderer. Have we
 got provisions?

Wilson pats his horse's saddle bags a couple times with the
 hand of his good arm.

ROBERT WILSON
 Taken care of.

This to his two new traveling companions with some amount of
 disgust.

JOHN MERRITT
 Off we go, then. YAW!

He snaps at Annabelle, and she races away west through the small space between the crowd.

Wilson and Rayanne are quick to snap the reigns of their horses and give out yelps of their own as the three of them ride out toward the oncoming sunset.

FADE TO:

EXT. MISSOURI/KANSAS STATES COUNTRYSIDE - LATE EVENING

The trio's horses are across the still-full mighty Missouri river, the bottom sides of their bodies gleaming in the sun with water dripping off.

Their pace quickens as they rush past thick foliage on all sides along the flat terrain that is Kansas.

FADE TO:

EXT. KANSAS COUNTRYSIDE - LATER EVENING

The sun is drooping down, but the riders continue their journey in a South-Westerly direction.

The magnificent sleek bodies of the horses in motion are enough to set your heart apace regardless of who rides atop. Their movement is strong, fast, and fearless.

The forested area in the distance behind them seems almost like a wall as they move into the sun and we watch them ride down the dusty road across the Kansas plains.

FADE TO:

EXT. CAMPSITE ALONG THE ROAD - NIGHT

There's a fire within a circle of rocks, and it's the only light they have to see by as they eat from a skillet full of beans.

The horses nearby are chomping on grass.

It's a perfect spot for a campsite, with fallen trees nearby, plenty of brush for soft bedding, and a bit of a canopy of trees to protect from the elements.

Finally, Wilson decides the quiet's too much and

ROBERT WILSON
Merritt, where'd you learn ta'
fight like that?

JOHN MERRITT
Like what?

as he stuffs his mouth full of beans.

ROBERT WILSON
You beat the heck outta me last
night. I jus' wanna know how you
did it...

JOHN MERRITT
When I was in Springfield, I saved
this Chinese immigrant's life in a
bar fight. He took me into his
home and taught me ju-jitsu.

ROBERT WILSON
Is that where ya' learn ta' beat up
poor folk?

JOHN MERRITT
No. It's where you learn to defend
yourself when you can, and beat up
people if you must.

ROBERT WILSON
Is it an'thin' like ki-rah-tee? I
read 'bout that, ya' know.
(with actions)
Chop! Kick! Punch! Is it
somethin' like that?

JOHN MERRITT
Yeah. It's something like that,
Wilson.

RAYANNE POTTER
Johnnie boy here don' wanna talk
'bout all that, Wilson.
(to Merritt)
I wanna hear 'bout how you was in
the Union army.

ROBERT WILSON
You was in the Union Army in real
life?

RAYANNE POTTER
A colonel, from what I heard.

Merritt looks frustrated. He sets down his plate near his horse's face. The horse takes to licking up what little remains of the beans.

JOHN MERRITT

Look, this is all stuff we can discuss later. I'm tired, and I'd like to get some sleep.

He leans back against the fallen tree trunk behind him and stretches his back out with a big yawn.

Wilson looks across at Rayanne.

ROBERT WILSON

Not much fer conversation, is he?

RAYANNE POTTER

He's been through a lot, Wilson. Leave 'im be.

JOHN MERRITT

I'm right here, you know...? I can hear you both.

Rayanne gets up, stretches her legs as she says

RAYANNE POTTER

I'm gonna go take me a pee. I'll be back in a moment.

Wilson shakes his head, leans back against his tree, pulls his Stetson down over his face and attempts to sleep with the firelight around him.

Merritt rolls over on his side away from the light.

ROBERT WILSON

Night, Merritt.

JOHN MERRITT

(frustrated)
Night, Wilson.

A long pause.

ROBERT WILSON

Ya' e'er wonder why folks like us call each other by our surnames?

JOHN MERRITT

Good night, Wilson.

Wilson harrumphs

ROBERT WILSON
Jus' thought I'd ask...

Rayanne walks out of the woods finishing pulling her pants up, looks at the men on the ground trying to fall asleep

RAYANNE POTTER
Ain't one o' you lazy bums gonna
put out the far'?

JOHN MERRITT
The fire isn't going anywhere,
Rayanne.

RAYANNE POTTER
So, you do this often?

JOHN MERRITT
Often enough, now go to sleep.

RAYANNE POTTER
Well, what if I ain' tar'd?

Merritt gets up on one arm, leans back and turns to face her as much as he can.

JOHN MERRITT
Then don't go to sleep. At least
let me go to sleep, though, hm?

Rayanne looks at Wilson with his hat over his face. Thumbing at Merritt,

RAYANNE POTTER
Is he gonna be like this the whole
trip?

ROBERT WILSON
Prob'ly.

Merritt sighs out loud with a steady staccato in it.

ROBERT WILSON
Sounds like he's out plumb cold.
Maybe we should let 'im sleep. You
know, he's had a rough day bein'
all couped up in the jail cell an'
all...

JOHN MERRITT
That's it!

Merritt gets up and walks away

JOHN MERRITT

(continued)

I'm going to sleep over here, away
from you two's prattle. I'll see
you both in the morning.

Rayanne watches him leave, turns to Wilson and

RAYANNE POTTER

Now what crawled up his craw?

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. WICHITA, KANSAS - MID MORNING OF NEXT DAY

The three horses with their riders come into town from the northeast. Their entrance is hardly noticed by the locals as they seem to be completely ignored. Everyone goes about business-as-usual.

The riders ride up to the local sheriff's office, jump down from their rides, tie up the horses on the post, and proceed to enter the office where SHERIFF MILTON is seated behind a desk doing paperwork.

SHERIFF MILTON

Good morning, folks. Can I help
you.

While his grammar is flawless, his drawl is strong.

JOHN MERRITT

Good morning. Are you the Sheriff?

SHERIFF MILTON

I am.

He stands up to shake hands with Merritt.

JOHN MERRITT

I'm John Merritt, and this is
Rayanne Potter...

Sheriff Milton curtly takes her hand with a smile and nod

SHERIFF MILTON

Hello, Ms. Potter.

JOHN MERRITT
...and Robert Wilson.

The Sheriff grabs Wilson's good hand for a firm shake.

Wilson takes a stab at speaking, sounding completely out-of-turn

ROBERT WILSON
We're from the town o' Kansas.
Marshal Ludermain sent us to...

JOHN MERRITT
I received his telegraph this
morning when I came into my office.
This way, gentlemen ... and lady.

...the last two words said with a touch of wry in his voice.

He leads them through a door in the wall behind him into a fairly large shed full of old junk: broken-down wagons, rusted-out plows, large chunks of metal that look like they're from a grain silo of sorts, and other sundry items.

Finally, they arrive at a door, and enter it to a small room where the Sheriff turns on an electric light.

What the three of them see next they are unprepared for ... multiple tintypes taken of two women, their chest cavities sliced open from navels to throats, their necks obviously strangled, they're internal organs removed and lying on napkins beside their bodies. There are even two pictures (one of each) of close-ups of the napkins with the entrails on them.

SHERIFF MILTON
I had my town mortician take these
before we buried the bodies. Both
of these ladies worked as whores at
the local brothel.

Rayanne seems only saddened, but it's Wilson who looks like he's going to lose it any second ... he walks outside the door, stands hunched over and suddenly does.

The other three wait until he's finished as he makes quite a spectacle of sound.

As he stands outside coughing, the deed complete,

JOHN MERRITT
Only these two murders?

SHERIFF MILTON

Yes, sir.

JOHN MERRITT

When did this happen?

SHERIFF MILTON

Just two night's ago during the fair. They actually packed up and left a day early because of this incident.

RAYANNE POTTER

I don' blame 'em.

JOHN MERRITT

Have you received any word from nearby towns of anything else like this happening, Sheriff?

SHERIFF MILTON

Only from your town, Mr. Otherwise, ain't no sign.

RAYANNE POTTER

Sounds like our culprit's headin' west.

JOHN MERRITT

It would seem that way, Rayanne.
(this to the Sheriff)
Any chance you could put us up for the night. We'd like to stay in town and do some investigating ... see if we can find some clues, perhaps another murder might take place tonight.

Wilson is by now standing at the door and speaks up

ROBERT WILSON

What makes ya' think that there could be another one ta'night, Merritt?

Merritt turns to the other and

JOHN MERRITT

Well, history so far in the town of Kansas has shown us that these murders don't take place every night.

(MORE)

JOHN MERRITT (cont'd)
 Sometimes there are two women
 murdered, but in two instances,
 only one. These events are a
 couple days apart. I'd like to
 stay and see if it happens again
 tonight. If so, we'll have a fresh
 trail to go after.

ROBERT WILSON
 ...And if it don't?

JOHN MERRITT
 I don't know, Wilson. We'll wait
 and see.

Merritt and Wilson turn to the Sheriff.

SHERIFF MILTON
 I'll put you three in the town
 hotel for the night. Times are
 tough, though, so only one night
 for free, you hear... If you stay
 another night, they'll charge ya'.

JOHN MERRITT
 We understand, Sheriff. We
 appreciate any help your town will
 give us in bringing this criminal
 to justice.

SHERIFF MILTON
 Trust me, Mister; if there's
 anything we can do, you can rest
 assured we will. We don't need
 anything like this happening in our
 town again.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. WICHITA, KANSAS SHERIFF'S OFFICE - AFTERNOON

Merritt, Rayanne, and Wilson walk back into the Sheriff's
 office and they sit down.

SHERIFF MILTON
 You folks got to understand that
 we're a large town. There're lots
 of places for a sadistic murderer
 to hide away, and lots of ways for
 him to escape.

(MORE)

SHERIFF MILTON (cont'd)
How do you folks plan on hunting
down someone like this?

JOHN MERRITT
I suggested to the Marshal that
bloodhounds might work well. Do
you know anyone in town who might
have one or two?

SHERIFF MILTON
I know a couple of folks who have
them, but I'm afraid you're only
gonna get one good one. The other
dogs are too old.

JOHN MERRITT
Well, we'll just hope one will be
enough. Do you know where both of
the bodies were lying when they
were found?

The Sheriff nods

SHERIFF MILTON
I can take you right to those
places.

JOHN MERRITT
Let's go.

SHERIFF MILTON
Right now?

JOHN MERRITT
Yes. Right now, please.

The Sheriff gets up, and as they walk out the door into the
sunlight...

EXT. - WICHITA, KANSAS - DOWNTOWN, AFTERNOON

RAYANNE POTTER
Were the murders very far apart?

SHERIFF MILTON
Not too far, dear. About fifty
yards or so, I'd say...

JOHN MERRITT
That's pretty consistent with the
other double-murder there in Kansas
town. What about time?

(MORE)

JOHN MERRITT (cont'd)
Do you have any notion as to how
far apart these murders were
committed?

SHERIFF MILTON
Oh, we estimated there was no more
than maybe an hour between the two.

ROBERT WILSON
Long enough fer the man to do his
business with 'em both before
killin' 'em...

Everyone else in the group pauses.

JOHN MERRITT
(turning his head back, a
bit condescending)
An astute observation, Wilson.

Wilson takes pride in the almost-facetious remark.

RAYANNE POTTER
I'd say that also fits the previous
double-murder. I think the other
two were about thirty minutes to an
hour apart.

Merritt takes a mental note of her statement.

JOHN MERRITT
Sheriff, is there anything else you
can tell us about the crime scene?
Were there any marks on the ground?
Signs of a scuffle?

SHERIFF MILTON
There was something suspicious in
the first one. I could almost tell
you that it looked like she might
have dragged him a short ways
before he was able to strangle her
unconscious.

JOHN MERRITT
Let's say the man is ... a big man,
like maybe ...
(looking around on the
street)
...that man over there...

He points to a fairly heavy man not far away. The Sheriff,
Rayanne, and Wilson all see who he's pointing at.

JOHN MERRITT

Could that first woman, at the size she was, pull him that distance?

The Sheriff turns back to Merritt

SHERIFF MILTON

Well, I've heard of small people in grave danger doing some mighty extraordinary things, but I'd say under the circumstance, he'd have had to've been smaller than that. I just don't think she'd have had the leverage for it.

JOHN MERRITT

...And you're sure this was the man's tracks and not hers...?

SHERIFF MILTON

Absolutely. She was barefoot. He had boots on.

Merritt lifts a hand to his face.

RAYANNE POTTER

What's on your mind, Merritt?

Merritt contemplates this for a moment before answering

JOHN MERRITT

I'm just thinking that this rules out Mikey.

Rayanne and Wilson both laugh.

ROBERT WILSON

Mikey Saddler...? You gots ta' be kiddin'. That poor thing ain't strong 'nough ta' lift a shovel and dig a hole.

RAYANNE POTTER

I gotta agree with Wilson, Merritt. That poor thing ain't got a brain in his body.

JOHN MERRITT

That's why I'm ruling him out. However, he was here with his siblings the night the murders took place.

RAYANNE POTTER

Them Saddler kids look after one 'nother, Merritt. They stick real close to Mikey all the time. He ain't particularly bright, and they're momma'd be so sick if they left him alone for a minute!

JOHN MERRITT

OK! OK! I get it. I'm ruling him out.

ROBERT WILSON

I jus' cain't believe you'd even consider 'im.

Merritt looks dead at Wilson.

JOHN MERRITT

You got any other suspects in mind?

ROBERT WILSON

Well, no. But I sure as heck wouldn' consider a retarded kid as a murderer...

FADE TO:

EXT. WICHITA, KANSAS, LARGE OPEN FIELD - DAY

The four people arrive at the site of what just a few days ago held a carnival. Marks of large tent stakes, big indentations where wheels and the like were, and foot prints, litter the landscape.

The sheriff, carrying a small tool bag with a shovel and pick-axe, leads them over to a small area, roped off with plain dead sticks.

SHERIFF MILTON

Right here's where the first body was found ... right behind the cotton candy tent.

The three of them check it over. Merritt kneels down on his honches and uncovers a place where blood stains still remain.

JOHN MERRITT

Is this where the napkin was?

The Sheriff looks around a moment to get his bearings.

SHERIFF MILTON
Nope. That's where her neck was.

JOHN MERRITT
Then, that would mean she was
laying this direction.

He makes a motion with his arms.

SHERIFF MILTON
That's correct.

Merritt stands up.

RAYANNE POTTER
What's on yer min' now, Merritt?

Merritt turns to the Sheriff

JOHN MERRITT
Where was the other body?

The sheriff walks away and the three closely follow him to
another area roped off, but this time it's behind bushes.

SHERIFF MILTON
Right here...

Rayanne and Wilson both go to looking around like Merritt was
with the first one ... both try to act like they know what
they're doing, both marvelously failing.

JOHN MERRITT
How did the killer get two
prostitutes to come with him over
behind a cotton candy stand and
into brush during a large carnival?

RAYANNE POTTER
Why didn' noone hear 'em scream
out?

ROBERT WILSON
How could no one notice all o' that
happenin'?

JOHN MERRITT
Those are two very important
questions. Sheriff, how late at
night did these murders occur?

SHERIFF MILTON

Oh, I'd say, comin' round about
nine thirty ... maybe ten of the
clock...

JOHN MERRITT

Think we can get a hold of one of
those blood hounds?

FADE TO:

EXT. WICHITA, KANSAS, LARGE OPEN FIELD - LATE AFTERNOON

The bloodhound sniffs the ground at the second site in the underbrush. The dog's owner is an older gentleman, and he seems quite stout and serious.

DOG OWNER

Whatcha got, boy? Hm? Has ya'
gotcherself a scent.

The dog barks, and starts meandering off toward the east.

JOHN MERRITT

(to the Sheriff)

What part of the carnival are we
passing now?

...after they've passed the other roped-off site.

SHERIFF MILTON

This here was the entrance.

The dog then turns south toward town and barks again looking up. It starts trying to run, and the owner and the group try to keep up with him, the latter four of which is not difficult.

The old man is out of breath when it seems the dog has lost the scent and starts digging at the dirt where it seems it's been dug up along the side of the road.

Merritt pulls out a small shovel from the Sheriff's bag and starts digging at the hole.

A few moments later he hits something with a clanging sound.

He begins to dig a little slower until he uncovers enough dirt to pull the rest away by hand, and getting on his knees he sweeps the dust away to reveal a large preserving jar.

He pulls it out, to the disgust of everyone present, including himself.

Inside is a heart, blood filling the bottom half of the jar. Around the heart is still fatty tissue, as if it was pulled out in haste.

Rayanne wretches, but it's Wilson who stands on the other side of the road dry-heaving, having already thrown up earlier.

Merritt sets the jar down and goes at digging again, quickly finding a second jar right next to the first, with the same sickening sight inside.

The Sheriff just shakes his head.

SHERIFF MILTON

What kind of man does such a horrible thing?

JOHN MERRITT

I'm not sure, Marshal, but this does beg the question ... Is it possible we'll find the same thing in Kansas Town if we use a bloodhound, or was the murderer trying to cover his tracks until he could return for these?

ROBERT WILSON

Who said he had any intention o' returnin' fer 'em?

JOHN MERRITT

I have a gut feeling we're not going to find our murderer here in Wichita...

RAYANNE POTTER

(to the Sheriff)

Well, Wichita hasn't seen another of these murders in two an' a half days, now, have ya'?

SHERIFF MILTON

No, Ma'am.

JOHN MERRITT

We should get some rest, Sheriff. Let's just see if our murderer is still in town.

(MORE)

JOHN MERRITT (cont'd)
 If he is, in all likelihood he'll
 try again tonight. If not, we'll
 head back to Kansas.

CUT TO:

INT. WICHITA HOTEL - LATE EVENING

Merritt and Wilson share a room. Wilson sits on the bed in his undershirt with his pants still on, boots removed. He's rubbing his sore feet.

Merritt sits in a chair in the corner still fully clothed.

ROBERT WILSON
 Plannin' on gettin' some shuteye in
 that chair, there, Merritt?

Merritt acts as if he didn't hear anything.

Robert tries again

ROBERT WILSON
 Merritt, you daydreamin' o'er
 there, 'er what?

Merritt looks a little surprised that Wilson is talking, but finally answers

JOHN MERRITT
 I'm just thinking, Wilson.

ROBERT WILSON
 'Bout what, 'zactly?

Merritt stands up

JOHN MERRITT
 Stay here. I'll be back in a bit.

He exits the room with Wilson looking after him. Wilson snorts, pulls his pants off and lays down in bed in his skivvies.

CUT TO:

EXT. WICHITA HOTEL - LATE EVENING

Merritt exits the hotel and looks around, finding the local bar with its lights on, and music playing.

He walks across the street and down a ways to it, hearing the music getting louder as he gets closer.

He walks in through the doors and sees the usual riff-raff, as well as some women nearby. This building doesn't have an upstairs, so the ladies, dressed in their wear to show off, stand against the wall or sit in chairs at tables waiting politely for an invitation.

He looks at one, and is noticeably tempted when she winks at him, but he moves to the bar instead.

He approaches and takes a bar stool as the bartender, an older gentleman with white hair and a mustache, walks up to him.

BARTENDER

What'll it be, mister?

JOHN MERRITT

Beer.

He says this as he puts a dollar coin on the counter.

The bartender picks up the coin, turns, and mete's out a big glass of beer, turns, and sets it in front of Merritt, and a fifty-cent piece follows.

Merritt nods, but puts his hand on the old man's wrist calmly to keep the man from walking off.

After a nice big gulp, and pushing the fifty-cent piece back to him,

JOHN MERRITT

Two nights ago, there was a murder.
Did you notice anything, or anyone
suspicious here?

The bartender grabs the coin, but doesn't seem to give this a second thought.

BARTENDER

The Sheriff done asked me that,
mister. I'll tell you the same
thing I tell'd him. There were a
bunch o' strangers here in the bar
the night of the carnival. In
fact, plum everyone o' my rega'ler
patrons was o'er there playin'
games and whatnot. Saw narry hide
ner hair o' most o' them.

JOHN MERRITT

So, you actually had this joint open during the carnival?

BARTENDER

Well, sure, mister. A man's gotta make a livin'. Besides, people still came in, they just didn't stay very long.

JOHN MERRITT

Did you know the two women who were killed?

BARTENDER

Sure did. One of 'em worked fer me. The other one worked fer the brothel down the street.

JOHN MERRITT

Tell me about the girl that worked for you.

The bartender thinks for a moment, and proceeds

BARTENDER

Well, she was the sweetest thing you e'er did set yer eyes on. She had pretty blonde hair, green eyes, and she was quite buxom, if ya's know what I mean...

He laughs at this. Merritt gives the man a smile as he takes another swig of his beer.

JOHN MERRITT

What did she do for a day job?

BARTENDER

Oh, durin' the day she worked fer a man what paints pictures. She was his assistant.

JOHN MERRITT

Do you know if they ... had a ...

BARTENDER

You mean, were they sleepin' together? Prob'ly. She was, after all, a whore...

JOHN MERRITT

How did he take her death?

BARTENDER

You know, mister, I ain't the person ta' be askin' that there kind o' questions to. You'd best go ask him. He's sittin' right o'er there in the corner.

The bartender points out the man in question; a silent, lonely man with a very thin build, and facial hair he hasn't shaved in a week, with a large bottle of whiskey in his hand, half full. Merritt thanks the bartender, gets up, and walks over to the painter.

JOHN MERRITT

Is this seat taken?

The man doesn't answer. Instead, he takes a big swig of the whiskey. He looks nigh ready to pass out with a huge frown on his face.

Merritt pulls out the seat he'd motioned at and sits across the table to look at the painter straight on. He grabs a quick drink of his beer.

JOHN MERRITT

(trying a second time)

My name's John. I want to ask you about your assistant.

There's a short spark of life in the painter's eyes, but it's quickly gone.

JOHN MERRITT

You miss her?

Finally, the man starts

PAINTER

Beer's fer the weak. Why ain'tchoo got a man's drink?

The other sets his bottle down on the table with a thud and takes his hand away.

Merritt looks down at his mug, sets it on the table a short ways away from himself and picks up the bottle of whiskey, looks it over, and takes a large gulp, proceeding to slam it back down on the table in about the same place.

The painter grabs the bottle and takes another big gulp.

Merritt can tell he's going to need another, waves the bartender over and points to the bottle.

JOHN MERRITT

Get me one of those.

The bartender smiles and nods, walks away, and the two men at the table trade shots of the whiskey bottle until its empty, the bartender returning with another just as Merritt's swallowing the last bit of the first bottle.

The bartender pops the top off and sets it down. Merritt pulls out a ten-spot and hands it to him.

JOHN MERRITT

Keep the change.

The bartender curtly thanks him and walks away.

Both men just sit there for a long moment.

Finally, Merritt says

JOHN MERRITT

Your turn.

The painter looks across at Merritt as if the other interrupted him, but grabs the new bottle and starts trying to chug it. About a quarter in he starts choking while sliding out of his chair. Merritt stands up and takes the bottle from the guy, pulls him back up into his seat and pats him on the back hard.

The painter recovers, and Merritt goes back to his seat.

JOHN MERRITT

How long you been drinkin' whiskey,
boy?

Merritt smiles, already starting to slur his words.

The man makes the sound of a snore, but he's still awake coughing out the last little bit from his lungs. He wavers a little like he's ready to pass out, but manages to stay seated with his eyes open.

PAINTER

Just started...

Merritt nods his head

JOHN MERRITT

I can tell.

Still looking like he's going to fall unconscious any second, the man continues

PAINTER

I just started drinkin' this stuff a few nights... 'Don't know how I missed out on this stuff.

JOHN MERRITT

Yeah. It's good at killin' the pain.

PAINTER

The pain ... the paint ... the paint's still wet ... her ... she ...

JOHN MERRITT

Tell me about your assistant.

PAINTER

I ain't got no assistant no mo'. She got dead. Paint's still wet, ya' know.

JOHN MERRITT

Yeah ... that's what'cha said.

PAINTER

You gonna finish that...

He points at the bottle of whiskey.

JOHN MERRITT

I think you've had enough o' that stuff.

PAINTER

I ... yeah ... but you ... you ain't hardly started.

Merritt shakes his head, grabs the bottle and starts drinking from it. After a couple of good swigs, he tilts it back and lets it roll down his throat going through about another quarter of it and slams it back down. Then he wipes his mouth with his bare arm.

JOHN MERRITT

Now, you gonnatalk'er not?

Merritt is already noticeably rolling a bit, but it seems evident he's done something like this before, as he holds his own.

PAINTER

This's her fav'rite place.

JOHN MERRITT
Yer assistant?

The man just nods.

PAINTER
I painted her ... I painted her up
real good a few times. She was a
beautiful ... a
(hiccup)
...a beautiful woman.

JOHN MERRITT
You painted her?

PAINTER
I paint. I'm'a painter.

JOHN MERRITT
I gathered that.

The painter grabs for the whiskey bottle, but Merritt is still more sober than the other, and quicker, managing to pull the bottle away from him.

The painter acts like he wasn't even going for it, instead leaning forward to rest his arm on the table to keep himself from falling over. With the same arm he points at Merritt

PAINTER
Let me tell you somethin', mister.
I'm a dang good painter. One o'
the best here in these here parts.
That's what I am. I paint her.

JOHN MERRITT
Why do you paint your assistant.

He leans onto the table himself to look at the painter square on.

PAINTER
'Cuz I love her. I love my
Bettiejean. She's the most ...
beautiful woman in these here
parts.

JOHN MERRITT
...And you're the best painter in
these here parts. That makesense.

PAINTER
Dang right, mister. I paint ...
good.

JOHN MERRITT
I want to see yer' paintings.

PAINTER
Why?

JOHN MERRITT
'Cuz I don't believe you.

The man starts to laugh ... it's more than a little awkward of a laugh as it seems to loop almost like he's hiccuping between each laugh.

PAINTER
I'll show you, mister. I'll show
you good ... I'm a good painter...

He makes to get up out of his chair and promptly falls to the floor. Somehow, though, he pulls himself up on his hands and knees

PAINTER
I'm OK. I'm OK.

...he adds as Merritt stands and bends down to grab the man. Instead, he helps the painter up, but...

PAINTER
I was goin' somewhere. Where was I
goin', mister?

JOHN MERRITT
You were gonna take me to yer place
to see yer paintings...

The man takes an odd look at Merritt, but continues ...

PAINTER
Do I know you...?

JOHN MERRITT
Yeah. We're best pals. You were
gonna take me to see yer paintings
at yer home.

PAINTER
Oh, yeah.

He tries to make off out of Merritt's hold, but promptly falls again toward the floor. Merritt manages to keep him upright.

JOHN MERRITT

Perhaps you'd better just tell me how to get there and I'll help you there.

PAINTER

That's ... that's a good idea.

Merritt looks at the bartender. The bartender smiles at Merritt.

JOHN MERRITT

Does he owe you anythin' for the first bottle?

BARTENDER

You took care of both of 'em.

Merritt nods and helps the painter out the saloon door.

CUT TO:

INT. PAINTER'S WORKSHOP - NIGHT

Merritt and his new friend are laughing at something as Merritt opens the door to the painter's home.

Merritt sets the man on a nearby chair, and fumbles around by the light of the moon shining in one window for a set of matches near a lamp.

He finds them, strikes a match, and lights the lamp.

Looking around, he sees other lamps and begins lighting them.

Slowly, as he lights more and more lamps, the room begins to unfold, as do the canvases of paintings on their canvas stands before him.

Merritt turns to the painter on the chair

JOHN MERRITT

You did all of this?

It's too late. The painter is unconscious and sliding off onto the floor. He falls right down without even noticing, and slumps off onto his left side, his head hitting the rug under the chair.

Merritt leaves him there, and now we see what he sees.

The paintings are good. Very good.

All of them are of what appear to be a woman in her mid- to late-twenties, and she is indeed quite beautiful.

There are at least two of her naked in some provocative pose, but the ones that seem to be newer take his interest.

The first shows her lying down in the position one might imagine a woman who's just been killed might well be in. However, her clothes are not torn, and her body is not cut open. In fact, there is no red in the painting.

JOHN MERRITT

Why isn't she cut open?

The second painting shows the woman naked, and instead of her breasts protruding in the manner of the other naked pictures, in this shot her heart is shown shining from behind her chest as if a star were there instead. Beside her body in this second shot is a square with red marks to portray the removal of her organs. Again, though, there are no markings on her body to show any cuts.

He reaches up and runs a finger over the paint. As he pulls it away we realize the paint is still wet.

JOHN MERRITT

So, that's what he meant.

Merritt begins taking notice of other things in the room and begins rifling through paperwork on a desk.

Nearby is a group of paintings not on stands, but sitting against each other, delicately placed so as not to efface each other.

Merritt makes his way over to them and rummages through them.

There are a handful of other women portrayed, but all of them are clothed, sometimes group shots of three or four women.

There are even paintings of buildings there in Wichita we can recognize from the day's goings-on, among other buildings we cannot. There are about twenty or so of these additional paintings, but nothing to make Merritt suspicious.

Merritt continues his search through the house, finally grabbing a lamp and going into the bedroom to look around.

The bed has obviously been slept in, and by quite possibly two individuals with some obvious implications.

There are red smears on one pillow, and as Merritt goes to view those closer by scratching at them, he soon realizes

JOHN MERRITT

Paint...

Merritt is about to leave the room when a glint catches his eye. There on the other side of the room is an empty jar, very similar to the ones they dug up earlier that day.

As he's about to exit the room now,

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

What are you doing?

He gasps. Then he holds up the lamp.

JOHN MERRITT

I'm sorry. I didn't see you there.

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

That's 'cause I wasn't here. I just came in and all the lamps were on. I heard you in here and thought maybe we had a burglar.

JOHN MERRITT

Nah. I brought the painter home, and he passed out on the floor. I was looking through his paintings ... hoping I might find some more in here.

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

He sells most of his paintings.

Merritt looks down a bit at her and now realizes she has a gun trained on him.

JOHN MERRITT

You won't need that. I'll leave.

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

Darn straight, you'll leave. I can tell a snoop from a friendly man just tryin' to help my man out.

JOHN MERRITT

He's your man?

CHARLENE WICKENBAR
Yeah. What of it?

JOHN MERRITT
So, are you his new assistant?

CHARLENE WICKENBAR
You're askin' way too many questions, mister. I recommend you just walk out the door and don't come back.

JOHN MERRITT
Look, miss...

A brief pause to see if she'll give him her name, and ...

CHARLENE WICKENBAR
Charlie.

JOHN MERRITT
Charlie ... the Marshal from Kansas town sent me to investigate the murders. I have permission from the local Sheriff to be "snooping," as you call it.

CHARLENE WICKENBAR
Yeah ... well, I'll talk with the Sheriff in the mornin'. As for right now, I think it best you be crawlin' back under whatever rock you crawled out from.

Merritt takes it easy, passes by her after she moves further into the bedroom. He hands her the lamp, and she follows him to the door with the gun on him until he's out of the house.

Then he turns, but she's already closing and locking the door.

He lets out an exasperated sigh, and walks back toward town.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

INT. WICHITA HOTEL - EARLY MORNING

Merritt is sound asleep (a lot of sound) in the chair in the corner of the room.

Wilson bends into frame and smacks Merritt somewhat hard on the face.

ROBERT WILSON
HEY! Wake up, I sayed!

Merritt comes to with a shake of his head. His eyes are groggy, and he takes a big yawn.

JOHN MERRITT
What time is it?

ROBERT WILSON
'Bout ten thirty.

Merritt jumps from the chair, still fully clothed.

JOHN MERRITT
Where's the Sheriff? I need to see him.

ROBERT WILSON
I'm sure he's in 'is office down the street. Where'd you go las' night?

JOHN MERRITT
We'll discuss that when we get there. Where's Rayanne?

ROBERT WILSON
You know, Merritt, why don'cha go find out where she is? You know what her room number is, don'cha?

Merritt walks right past Wilson and out the door. Wilson follows.

ROBERT WILSON
Hey ... Wait up ...

CUT TO:

INT. WICHITA SHERIFF'S OFFICE - LATE MORNING

Merritt, Wilson, and Rayanne all walk into the Sheriff's office.

SHERIFF MILTON
Well, there you three are. I was beginning to think you'd done left.

JOHN MERRITT
Sheriff, have you spoken to the
painter?

SHERIFF MILTON
Of course. He was one of my first
suspects.

JOHN MERRITT
Have you ruled him out?

SHERIFF MILTON
Well, not exactly, but I don't got
nothing to hold him on, either.

Merritt sits down in the chair across the desk from the
Sheriff.

JOHN MERRITT
I was in his house last night. I
guess he's got a live-in.

SHERIFF MILTON
Charlene Wickenbar.

JOHN MERRITT
How long have the two of them been
together?

SHERIFF MILTON
Since I've known him. They came as
a package.

JOHN MERRITT
Are they married?

SHERIFF MILTON
Nope ... at least, not that I'm
aware of...

JOHN MERRITT
Do they share a bed?

SHERIFF MILTON
I believe so, but I ain't got no
proof of that or nothing.
(BEAT)
How'd you meet him?

JOHN MERRITT
At the bar last night. Seems he
went to get drunk. I helped him
home last night.
(MORE)

JOHN MERRITT (cont'd)
 While I was looking around his
 place, she suddenly came in with a
 gun drawn on me.

SHERIFF MILTON
 Sounds right. She's pretty
 protective of him.

JOHN MERRITT
 Any idea if he and his assistant,
 Bettiejean, were together in bed,
 too?

SHERIFF MILTON
 She was a whore, Mister Merritt. I
 have every reason to believe that
 the two of them were sharing the
 bed on occasion when Charlie wasn't
 home.

JOHN MERRITT
 So, Charlene ... er, Charlie is
 gone quite a bit?

SHERIFF MILTON
 She's a sharp shooter and knife-
 thrower for the carnival.

ROBERT WILSON
 Wait ... the same one what passed
 through here the other day?

SHERIFF MILTON
 The same one ... that's usually how
 we get them here ... because she
 works for them.

RAYANNE POTTER
 That'd make sense. If she were all
 jealous o' him havin' a lover while
 she was gone, she might be takin'
 it out on all the ladies' o' the
 night.

JOHN MERRITT
 What wouldn't make sense is why she
 waited till she got here after
 killing five women in the town of
 Kansas to kill the one he was with.

RAYANNE POTTER
 Sheriff, how long was that painter
 seein' the whore?

JOHN MERRITT
 ...Bettiejean...

RAYANNE POTTER
 Right...

SHERIFF MILTON
 Well, I'd say probably a little
 over a year or so...

JOHN MERRITT
 ...and how long would you think
 Charlie would have been aware of
 it?

SHERIFF MILTON
 It wasn't nothing the two hid, or
 nothing. I'd say, about the same
 amount of time.

RAYANNE POTTER
 Yeah, but how long is this Charlie
 woman gone from town outta' the
 year with'the carnival?

SHERIFF MILTON
 About half the year.

JOHN MERRITT
 Sheriff, I think the two of us
 should have a nice long talk with
 Charlie.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE PAINTER'S HOUSE - MID-DAY

Sheriff Milton knocks on the door of the Painter's home, with
 Merritt standing beside him.

They wait a significant amount of time while Merritt says

JOHN MERRITT
 I doubt he's slept off that
 hangover, yet. He said he'd never
 had whiskey before a couple nights
 ago.

The Sheriff laughs at the thought as they hear footsteps
 coming to the door. A face peaks through the curtain of the
 glass in the door, and finally it is unlocked.

There stands Charlene in a night gown and a frown, her hair completely mussed like she just got out of bed. Her age creeps through the lines in her face.

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

Hello, there, Sheriff. Has this man come to apologize fer sneakin' around my house?

The Sheriff removes his hat and holds it over his chest.

SHERIFF MILTON

No, ma'am. He's an investigator from the town of Kansas. He's been researching them murders we had here a few nights ago. He has my permission to go sneakin' if that's what he needs to do.

She frowns even more, if that's possible, and acquiesces with little to no honest hospitality,

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

I see. Won't you both come in, then.

CUT TO:

INT. PAINTER'S HOME - DAY

She stands aside as the Sheriff and Merritt both step inside.

It's obvious some cleaning has been done since the night before. The paintings have been moved into lines around the large living room, where the night before they were haphazardly placed. Perhaps a couple of the paintings have been removed from their stands as there are two or three blank canvases.

SHERIFF MILTON

Is the man of the house home?

Charlene makes a motion with her head with a tilt upward, almost a snub, as if to say it doesn't matter if he's home or not, but

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

He's still in bed asleep. What's this about, Sheriff?

SHERIFF MILTON

We just had a few questions for you, Ms. Charlie.

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

"We", or
 (she nods at Merritt)
 "He...?"

SHERIFF MILTON

Well, after hearing what he wanted to ask you, they became my questions as well. Now, why don't you hear him out?

She walks away slowly more into the living room, but then turns gently, standing in the center as if to give them all more space.

Then she nods to Merritt

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

Go ahead, Mr. Investigator.

You can almost hear a hatred for him in her voice.

Merritt steps forward one step.

JOHN MERRITT

Ms. Charlie, were you aware of the relationship between your boyfriend and the lady, Ms. Bettiejean?

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

Of course, Mister. He didn't hide nothin' from me. He and I ain't married.

JOHN MERRITT

Did you have a difficult time sharing him with her?

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

Mister, when I'm gone with the carnival six months out o' the year every year, I realize we both have ... needs. You can't very well expect us both to be a hund'erd per-cent faithful when we can't be a hund'erd per-cent together, now, can ya'?

JOHN MERRITT

So, you see other men when you're out of town?

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

Of course.

JOHN MERRITT

Did you know Ms. Bettiejean?

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

We'd met once 'er twice. She acted as his assistant when they wasn't sleepin' together.

JOHN MERRITT

Did she know what position you held in his life?

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

Yes, sir. When I was home, she wouldn't come over but durin' the day to help, and when he was done paintin' or needin' her help, he'd send'er on home. There twas ne'er any hard feelin's tween me'n'her.

JOHN MERRITT

When did you come home from the carnival?

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

Last night. I'd heard about the murders. When I found out one of'em was ol' Bettiejean, I asked my boss if I could take a little time to be with'im. Bless his heart.

At the last line she turns toward the bedroom with a polite nod.

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

(continued)

He really liked that ol' whore. Painted a horde o' pictures of 'er. I cain't go nowhere's in this house an' not see her swaggerin', gut-wrenchin' face.

She says it with much distaste.

JOHN MERRITT

...And yet, you approved...?

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

I wouldn't call anythin' we do
 apart from each other approvin',
 Mister. More just acknowledgin'
 the obvious need fer'
 companionship.

JOHN MERRITT

I hope you don't take this next
 question out of context, then. I
 hear you're pretty good with a
 knife.

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

Mister, I'm equally good with
 knives and guns.

She pulls a knife from a nearby shelf, holding the blade
 only, pulls back and flings it at Merritt, missing his face
 by only a half-inch or so. He can feel the butt of the knife
 brush the hair on his face.

He moves a hand to touch his face just after hearing the
 knife blade stick in the wall behind him.

Both the Sheriff and Merritt turn to see the knife, the blade
 buried at least an inch into the wood of the window pane.

JOHN MERRITT

I appreciate your time, Ms.
 Charlie.

Merritt nods to the Sheriff.

The Sheriff smiles at Charlie, nods once, and says,

SHERIFF MILTON

Thank you, Ms. Charlie. Tell your
 man when he gets up I was here, and
 that I look forward to seeing him
 at poker night on Friday.

CHARLENE WICKENBAR

Will do, Sheriff.

CUT TO:

EXT. WICHITA STREET - AFTERNOON

As Merritt and the Sheriff exit the Painter's home and head
 back toward the main section of town

SHERIFF MILTON
Do you think she did it?

JOHN MERRITT
Not any more, Sheriff.

SHERIFF MILTON
...But, she's really good with a knife. Did you see what she did in there? If she'd been off by a half inch, she'd probably killed you!

JOHN MERRITT
That's the problem, Sheriff. She can throw those things, but whoever killed those women did so by strangling them, and then cutting them open. She's not a surgeon ... she's a sharp-shooter ... nothing more.

SHERIFF MILTON
Then, we're back to where we began.

JOHN MERRITT
That we are, Sheriff. The trail's gone cold here in Wichita. I'm willing to bet the person we're looking for isn't here any more.

As Merritt's finishing up what he's saying, a young male comes running up to them.

YOUNG BOY
Sheriff! Sheriff! Come quick.
There was another one o' them there murders last night!

As the other two get ready to run, the Sheriff is quick to ask,

SHERIFF MILTON
Where at?

YOUNG BOY
In Kansas, Missouri!

The Sheriff and Merritt both look at each other, and the Sheriff shakes his head.

SHERIFF MILTON
T'seems you were right.

They run back toward the Sheriff's office.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, MAIN STREET - NEXT DAY, AFTERNOON

Merritt, Wilson, and Rayanne come back into town on their tired horses. All three equines have their heads bent, ready to get some rest, and as their riders remove themselves from the animals' backs, they seem to take pleasure in this moment as they are tied up to a nearby railing next to a water trough. They immediately take to drinking from it.

Meanwhile, the three humans walk into the Sheriff's office saddle-sore.

The Marshal and Mortimer are standing inside.

MORTIMER RANDALL

Ah, Merritt ... Did you find anything important there?

JOHN MERRITT

I did. Where did this new murder occur?

WADE LUDERMAIN

In a back alley on the Northeast side o' town.

Merritt nods to his two companions for the Wichita trip.

JOHN MERRITT

You two are welcome to go back to whatever it is you do around here. Thanks for your...

As he's trying to finish,

RAYANNE POTTER

You ain't gettin' rid o' me that easily. I know most o' these women around here. I'm stayin' ta' help.

ROBERT WILSON

Me, too, Merritt. I ain't lettin' you get all the glory fer solvin' this on yer own.

Merritt stares at them a brief second...

JOHN MERRITT

Alright, then.

(this to the other two
men)

Let's find ourselves a bloodhound.

FADE TO:

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, BACK ALLEYWAY - MID-AFTERNOON

The Marshal, Merritt, Mortimer, Rayanne, and Wilson are all close together as they survey the area where this new murder took place now two nights before.

On a leash held by the Marshal is a bloodhound sniffing at the area where the victim was found.

Merritt is squatting on the ground, one knee down as he looks around at how the body was laying, and where the entrails were laid on the napkin. Blood still stains the dirt in various areas.

The bloodhound whimpers a few times. It looks left, then right, then left again.

ROBERT WILSON

What's wrong with it?

JOHN MERRITT

It's confused, Wilson.

(looking at Mortimer)

Which way did you take the body?

MORTIMER RANDALL

That way.

Mortimer points out toward the main street.

JOHN MERRITT

Then our culprit went the other way. Let's see if we can lead him.

Merritt takes a handful of bloodied dirt in his hand and holds it up to the dog, encouraging it to follow him further away in the opposite direction from the street. Then he drops the dirt on the ground, dusting his hands together to get it off of him, and allows the dog to find the scent.

The dog barks and is soon hot on the trail making its way through a few streets, stopping occasionally to sniff around.

At each of these locations, they find blood drops.

RAYANNE POTTER

I don' get it, Merritt. Why's the dog keep stoppin' at these spots?

JOHN MERRITT

...Because our murderer did. He must have been trying to sneak through the streets to make sure he wasn't caught.

Over again, they run and stop ... three times they run and stop through the streets of the town until the dog barks again like it's finally gathered the information it needs, and it takes off pulling on the leash hard, practically pulling the Marshal along behind it.

The dog makes its way to a large shed on the outskirts of town on the far east side and begins sniffing under the door in the back.

MORTIMER RANDALL

There's a padlock on it.

Mortimer grabs it and pulls on it, but it's locked tight.

JOHN MERRITT

Who owns this place, Marshal?

WADE LUDERMAIN

Ol' Rusty Hardinger does, but I ain't seen him in town in two months. He an' his wife took off on a trip around the world after he retar'd. They ain't s'pose ta' be back till the end o' June.

JOHN MERRITT

Did he give the keys to someone to watch the place for him until he got back?

WADE LUDERMAIN

He sure did. He gave the key to Seamus Saddler.

Wilson and Rayanne look at each other.

JOHN MERRITT

Cindy's husband, I take it?

WADE LUDERMAIN

The self-same. Why?

JOHN MERRITT

Oh, just a hunch. My companions
and I will take it from here,
Marshal. We'll get your man.

FADE TO:

EXT. SADDLER'S HOUSE - MID-AFTERNOON

Merritt, Wilson, and Rayanne are once again on horseback as they pull up to the Saddler homestead on a large open plain north of the town.

The family is all outside working. SEAMUS SADDLER and Sonny are cutting wood. Martha, Bertha-Lynn, and Mikey all pick up the pieces and put them in a wheelbarrow, and Cindy stands behind the wheelbarrow waiting until it's full.

They all notice the three riding up.

Cindy seems the most upset, having been in the Marshal's office when Merritt was there, and she seems to have a dislike of him already, but that could just as easily be applied to Wilson, or even, and most especially to Rayanne, since we already know how she feels about prostitutes.

SEAMUS SADDLER

Well, now, t'looks like we got us
some visitors.

It's hard to tell how the patriarch of the family feels. He has a completely stoic face at this moment, perhaps always.

JOHN MERRITT

Hello, Mr. Saddler. I'm John
Merritt. We'd just like to ask you
and your lovely wife a few
questions.

SEAMUS SADDLER

If you're wantin' to buy some
property, I done told that lowlife
son-of-a-gun, Frautworth, we ain't
sellin'. This property's been in
this family since before the
foundin' of this state!

As he speaks, he moves across the lawn to stand beside his wife ... a united front against any on-comers trying to take over their land.

RAYANNE POTTER

I can assure you, Mr. Saddler, that
ain't no one of us tryin' ta'
git'yer property.

JOHN MERRITT

The questions have to do with the
local murders. I feel maybe you
and your son, Mikey, might have
some information that could help us
get to the bottom of who's doing
it.

Seamus turns to the children.

SEAMUS SADDLER

Get inside, kids.

(as an afterthought)

Mikey, you can stay out here with
us.

(finally to Merritt)

When the kids's inside, you can ask
yer questions.

Merritt gets off his horse, followed closely by Wilson and Rayanne. They approach the remaining family members slowly, giving time for the other children to make their way into the house.

Merritt stops with a good ten feet to spare between him and the family ... Mikey finally getting over to stand next to his father. He squints at Merritt in the afternoon sun, but finally decides it's not good enough, and he lifts a hand up to shield his eyes.

JOHN MERRITT

Mikey, you don't usually go
anywhere without your siblings, do
you.

MIKEY SADDLER

No-no-no-sir, Mis-Mister Merritt,
sir. Pop-Pop-papa don't l-let me.

JOHN MERRITT

I want to understand why you were
with the teacher late in the
evening without your siblings.
Would you tell me?

Seamus blows out his mouth, somewhat toward his wife but not at her.

SEAMUS SADDLER

Mr. Merritt, the boy needs help with his studies. He's a might-bit slow, if ya' hadn't noticed.

JOHN MERRITT

I understand that, Mr. Saddler. I want to hear it from Mikey. I believe he might be able to help us solve the crime. Please...

(this to Mikey)

Mikey, I want you to tell me.

MIKEY SADDLER

T'sli-t'slike my pop-poppa says, Mister-Mer-Merritt, sir. I needs hel-help wit-wit my homework. She-she offered to help me wit-with it that ni-night.

As he speaks, his lips don't tremble. It's more like he's having trouble completely framing the words.

Merritt eyes Cindy a moment, noticing she has a bit of a menacing glare, staring off in another direction.

JOHN MERRITT

Mikey, on that night, you and Ms. Harkwood were together, did she help you with her homework?

MIKEY SADDLER

Yes, yes-sir. Yes she di-did.

JOHN MERRITT

Did she also make moves at you to

...

(unsure how to put it)
give her pleasure?

It's a small gamble that barely pays off. The parents don't fight this, but Mikey seems all too eager to run rather than stay here and answer questions.

He gives a general look toward his parents a second, and noticing they aren't going to stop this line of questioning, answers

MIKEY SADDLER

She-she-she-she-she-she ... ye-yessir-yessir, she-she did, Mister Merritt.

He frowns hard, and his parents frown harder.

JOHN MERRITT

Mikey, on that evening, did she seem ... I don't know ... preoccupied, or worried?

MIKEY SADDLER

No, no-sir. She-she didn't. She ac-acted like she al-always di-did when she-she-she as-asked me to gi-give her ... wha-what she-she wanted.

Merritt decides he's had enough of this, and takes an alternate approach now.

JOHN MERRITT

(to Seamus)

Did Rusty Hardinger give you a key to his warehouse on the east side of town, sir?

SEAMUS SADDLER

(perturbed, and confused)

I don't know what that's got ta' do...

JOHN MERRITT

I already know the answer, Mr. Saddler. I just want to hear it from you.

Seamus looks at his wife, but finally

SEAMUS SADDLER

Yes, he did. My wife told me not ta' do it. Says he's always up ta' no good, that ol' geezer.

JOHN MERRITT

What did he want you to do?

SEAMUS SADDLER

Just check on it from time to time ... make sure that no one was goin' in there ... he's got a lot'a enemies, ya' know.

JOHN MERRITT

No, sir. I didn't know that. How often do you go check on it.

CINDY SADDLER

He don't!

JOHN MERRITT

You don't let him?

CINDY SADDLER

I always ask Mikey ta' do it. It does 'im good ta' do some walkin'.

JOHN MERRITT

...But I thought you didn't let him go anywhere without one of your other kids with him.

CINDY SADDLER

Of course I don't. I send Sonny or one of the girls to the store sometimes, and when I does, I send Mikey with'em. He goes to the Hardinger place while the other one picks up what I need at the store, and then when they's come back through they bring Mikey back.

JOHN MERRITT

That's a good idea, Miss. Would you mind if Mikey came with us to the Hardinger place? The Marshal's going to meet us there, so there won't be anything for you to worry about. He's going to have us check something out.

Mikey looks concerned, but he doesn't say anything.

Cindy nods. Seamus finally says

SEAMUS SADDLER

I don't see what good it'll do, but I suppose he can go.

CINDY SADDLER

Mikey, go inside and get the key, and go with these folks. Let's help them out as much as we can, like law-abidin' citizens and good Christian folks should.

Mikey doesn't say anything. He just walks inside, and comes back out moments later with a key in hand.

CUT TO:

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, HARDINGER'S WAREHOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

Mikey is sitting on the back of Wilson's horse, as his is the only one without a saddle.

They ride in from the north, and sure enough the Marshal is standing near a side door with the whimpering hound at his side.

The warehouse, now that we can see a larger frame of it, is rather large. It might be about eighty feet by perhaps sixty feet, and stands around two stories tall.

Mikey looks a little scared as they help him off the horse.

RAYANNE POTTER

What's wrong, Mikey.

MIKEY SADDLER

Idon'-Idon'-Idon' li-like dogs ...
Ma'am.

JOHN MERRITT

That's alright, Mikey. He's on a
leash, and the Marshal will make
sure he doesn't come near you, OK?

Mikey doesn't say anything, or even look at Merritt. He just stares at the hound.

They lead him over to the door, and Marshal backs the dog away so Mikey can unlock the padlock.

MIKEY SADDLER

Can I-can I-can I go, now-now
Mister-Mister Merritt, sir?

JOHN MERRITT

No, Mikey. We need your help.
You've been in here before, right?

Mikey nods his head with his hands in cowering positions against his chest.

JOHN MERRITT

Is there something in there you're
afraid of?

Again, he doesn't answer.

Merritt pulls him forward and the two walk in together.

There's a lantern nearby with a box of matches not far out of reach. He takes a match, strikes it, and lights the lantern.

After he shakes out the match and throws it into a tin cup, Merritt picks up the lantern and pulls Mikey in further with him.

The Marshal follows with the hound, which sniffs the ground and goes off in another direction.

Wilson and Rayanne go inside, too, but seem less interested in following either party. They just stand at the door and wait.

JOHN MERRITT

What do you think is in here,
Mikey?

MIKEY SADDLER

Gh-gh-gh-ghosts, Mr. Merritt...

Merritt looks at the young man.

JOHN MERRITT

Why do you think there're ghosts in
here?

MIKEY SADDLER

C-c-c-c-cuz-cuz, Mr. Merritt, I
thin-think Mr. and Mrs. Hardinger
might'a die-died in here...

Suddenly, the dog barks. They can all hear scratching, as if the animal is trying to dig through wood.

Merritt pulls Mikey along around a large workbench toward the Marshal who is already trying to get the dog away from that area.

As Merritt and Mikey arrive, Rayanne walks up, followed closely by Wilson.

WADE LUDERMAIN

There's a panel of wood here that
looks like it can be lifted up on.

Merritt pushes away a large metal pole with one cemented end, and sure enough there's a handle underneath it, and the outline of a cutaway boarding can clearly be seen.

Merritt lifts up on it and holds the light over the whole. Inside is a ladder that goes down.

JOHN MERRITT
 (to Mikey)
 You want to go down, first?

Mikey looks terrified.

MIKEY SADDLER
 No-no-no-no-sir!
 (breath ... breath)
 No, sir!

John looks up at the Marshal. Handing him the lantern

JOHN MERRITT
 Hold this a second, will ya'?

The Marshal grabs the lantern as Merritt grabs hold of the ladder to make sure it's steady.

JOHN MERRITT
 You want to come down with me,
 Wilson?

Wilson walks around toward that side.

ROBERT WILSON
 I'll follow you, Merritt.

The Marshal hands the lantern down to Merritt as the two men make their way down the ladder, Wilson rather slowly, with his other arm still slung.

Ryanne walks over to the trembling Mikey and puts her arm around him.

RAYANNE POTTER
 It's alright, Mikey. There's
 nothin' ta' fear.

Mikey turns his head toward her and lays it on her heaving chest.

INT. HOLE UNDER FLOORING OF WAREHOUSE - DAY

A sudden bark from the hound reverberates inside the small room Merritt has reached the floor of and Wilson is about to. The echo strikes them both, and they both shudder for a brief moment.

Merritt holds the lantern up to look around. While it looks like a regular shop for the most part, with metal and wood pieces strewn about on shelves, tools and nails filling a couple of benches, and knives, horseshoes, and guns on another shelf in no particular order or fashion, what catches their attention is the one row of jars with blood and human hearts inside.

The hair on Wilson's arm stands up on end. Merritt looks disturbed.

ROBERT WILSON

'You think Mr. Hardinger is doin'
this?

Merritt slowly turns his head to Wilson, who's just staring at the jars.

With disgust,

JOHN MERRITT

(sincerely)
No. I don't.

He finally turns his head back to the jars.

JOHN MERRITT

(continuing)
...But look around for some clues.
Anything to prove Mikey's
innocence.

ROBERT WILSON

Like what...?

JOHN MERRITT

I don't know. Just ... just look
around.

INT. WAREHOUSE, MAIN FLOOR - DAY

The Marshal is trying to keep the dog from jumping in the hole after Merritt and Wilson. The dog continues to whimper and whine.

Rayanne is trying to calm Mikey, who seems to be getting more and more upset with each passing moment.

Next, we can see a hand reaching for something on a shelf, and we can soon distinguish and realize it is Mikey's hand from around Rayanne's back.

Mikey grabs a large butch knife and slowly lifts it up behind her back, finally pulling away just a bit. He reaches around her, grabs her from behind to hers and the Marshal's surprise, holding the knife to her throat.

WADE LUDERMAIN

What're you doin', Mikey?

MIKEY SADDLER

Shut up, Marshal. Just do what I say, and no one's gonna get hurt.

His breathing is hard.

RAYANNE POTTER

What happened to your stuttering?

MIKEY SADDLER

I haven't had a studderin' problem since I was ten years old. Everyone expected me to keep doin' it, so I did it for them. Same with the limp. They all expected it, so that's what I done.

The Marshal's voice is raised and aimed at the hole.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Mikey, put the knife down. It doesn't have to go like this.

MIKEY SADDLER

Evidently, it do, Marshal. Now close that door.

(nodding his head at the trap door)

I SAID CLOSE IT!

A couple of hard breaths as the Marshal kicks the door closed.

MIKEY SADDLER

Good. I want you to back out the door over there slowly.

As the Marshal backs away slow, Mikey pushes Rayanne forward with him, and with one foot nudges the large bar with the cemented end back into place, effectively cutting off Merritt's and Wilson's escape for now.

They can soon hear banging on the floor, and several attempts to push it up, but Mikey seems to know just how difficult that can be and continues on his path.

The Marshal steps out the door, and Mikey tells Rayanne

MIKEY SADDLER

Now, pull the door shut and lock it
with yer left arm.

She pulls the door shut and uses the inside dead bolt to lock
the Marshal out.

Then Mikey grabs her around her fairly large waste, holding
the knife up tight to her throat. His breath is hot and
heavy on her neck as if he were trying to reach his neck
around enough to look her in the face

MIKEY SADDLER

You're not nearly as pretty as the
others, but I betchyou got a nice
heart like them...

RAYANNE POTTER

No, Mikey. I ain't got a nice
heart like those other girls. My
heart's all black an' ugly. It's
uglier than I am.

MIKEY SADDLER

Shut up!

RAYANNE POTTER

I know yer parents raised you
better'n this, Mikey.

MIKEY SADDLER

(louder, gritting his
teeth)

I said, shut up!

INT. HOLE UNDER FLOORING OF WAREHOUSE - DAY

Wilson is shaking his head.

ROBERT WILSON

Looks like you was right...

JOHN MERRITT

This isn't the time, Wilson. Help
me find a way out of here.

ROBERT WILSON

...And what makes you think there's
an other way out o' here?

Merritt sighs, and continues looking.

Wilson finally thinks better of himself and starts looking, too.

He finds something

ROBERT WILSON
What about this, Merritt?

He holds up something like a crowbar to the other.

Merritt nods.

JOHN MERRITT
That should get us out of here.
Hold the lantern up for me.

Merritt climbs the ladder to the top, bangs on it a couple of times, and then uses the crowbar against the hinged side to pry them loose. He tugs and pushes and pulls, and finally they come free.

He pushes the wooden door up from that side and lifts it from under the cemented metal bar.

Merritt looks down at Wilson and silences him with a finger to his mouth, then proceeds to climb out of the hole as quietly as he can.

He stands up and looks over the work bench to see Mikey standing there with Rayanne.

He's sniffing at her, holding a large butch knife to her throat.

MIKEY SADDLER
You smell like yer afraid o' me.

RAYANNE POTTER
I am, right now, Mikey. I'm scared
yer gonna do somethin' you'll
regret.

She swallows hard, feeling the knife blade against her throat.

Merritt makes his way quietly around, ducking behind the work bench, careful not to hit anything on the floor.

MIKEY SADDLER
I ain't regretted it the other
times I done it.
(MORE)

MIKEY SADDLER (cont'd)
 My momma says all you women's
 alike. Yon's all should have yer
 hearts removed. You don't deserve
 'em.

RAYANNE POTTER
 Is that what she tells you, Mikey?
 Does she tell you that prostitutes
 and women like me don't deserve
 hearts?

MIKEY SADDLER
 No. She told me yon's didn't have
 hearts. That if yon's did, you
 wouldn't do whatcha do.

Merritt grabs a length of metal pole and walks slowly up
 around to stand behind Mikey.

RAYANNE POTTER
 You're mom's prob'ly right, Mikey.
 Like I toldja, my heart's mean an'
 ugly. It's old, an' it ain't as
 clean as it once was when I was
 younger.

MIKEY SADDLER
 Yeah, well, mine's clean. Clean as
 soap. I'm gettin' rid of the filth
 in their hearts one whore at a
 time, an' you're next.

Merritt steps forward giving himself away as he does, but
 it's too late, because Mikey notices the swing toward him.
 He dodges fast, though, and pulls away from Rayanne, somewhat
 pushing her forward.

Merritt's swing lands somewhere between the two of them, as
 Rayanne falls forward into the knife as it's being pulled
 away, and it slices her right arm.

She falls forward onto the floor bleeding, grabbing for it
 with her other hand as she rolls over onto her back, a yelp
 of pain.

Mikey stands up with a wry smile, breathing hard.

MIKEY SADDLER
 Nice move, Mister Merritt. You
 almost got me.

JOHN MERRITT
 Give me another chance. I won't
 miss next time.

Mikey holds the butch knife in his strong hand and pretends to dodge imaginary swings from Merritt.

Merritt leans toward Rayanne a bit to see if Mikey will move away from her. He does.

JOHN MERRITT

Rayanne, get out of the way.

Rayanne is quick for as heavy as she is. She stands to her feet and walks fast, over and out of the way to stand near Wilson who has somehow made his way out of the hole as well.

JOHN MERRITT

So, are you going to tell me why you really did all this?

MIKEY SADDLER

I done tol' Rayanne. Weren't you listenin'?

JOHN MERRITT

Oh, I was listening, alright. I just don't believe you. You're making it all sound so righteous, but knowing what I know of you now, you're not righteous. You just want to exact some kind of revenge.

MIKEY SADDLER

I can see I can't pull one over on you, old man. I paid Miss Lila for a night with her. She wouldn't take my money, and she wouldn't sleep with me. She said I was too innocent.

JOHN MERRITT

So you killed her?

MIKEY SADDLER

Not at first. At first, I tied her up, then I had my way with her. I don't know if she enjoyed it or not, but I sure did.

JOHN MERRITT

You're sick!

MIKEY SADDLER

Then when I untied her, she told me she was gonna tell my mamma. I couldn't have that.

(MORE)

MIKEY SADDLER (cont'd)
My momma thinks I'm sweet and
innocent. I'm her little baby boy.

JOHN MERRITT
That's when you killed her.

MIKEY SADDLER
It was an accident. She tried to
push me, so I tied her up around
her throat real tight to choke some
sense into her, but I pulled too
hard. It sliced her throat open.

JOHN MERRITT
Then what?

MIKEY SADDLER
I smelled blood...
(He looks like he's
pondering it)
I tasted blood...

He licks his mouth.

Rayanne holds her hands to her mouth, but Wilson is the one
who looks ill as they listen.

MIKEY SADDLER
She died. So I cut her open to see
if I could find out why she didn't
like me ... see if I could fix her
up. I finally figured out where
her heart was after some diggin'
around. I was gonna put it all
back together after I fixed her
heart, but instead the mortician
found her and took her away.

Mikey makes a slow move to get around Merritt, who lets him
get further into the warehouse toward an open space.

MIKEY SADDLER
You see, Merritt, I was gonna make
everythin' alright...but I had to
fix what was wrong with her first.

JOHN MERRITT
Her, and the next one ... what was
her name...?

MIKEY SADDLER
Elizabeth...

JOHN MERRITT
 ...and then Miss Harkwood, who
 slept with you willingly.

MIKEY SADDLER
 (mad)
 She didn't sleep with me willingly!
 That's just somethin' I told my
 momma, cuz you know she worries
 about me so ... her little
 Mikey...who'd ne'er hurt a fly...

Merritt takes a quick swing at the young male, but he turns and slices at Merritt toward his hand. Merritt's quick though, and removes his hand just in time, the knife hitting the metal bar, knocking it out of Merritt's other hand.

Mikey takes another swing the opposite direction, up toward Merritt's throat, but Merritt grabs the young man's hand and twists. Sadly, the young man is agile enough to bend the knife downward toward his face and pulls upward, slicing a deep gash in the left side of Merritt's face.

Merritt pushes away from the kid, his hand to the cut, and Mikey kicks him away, knocking Merritt onto his back on the wooden floor.

MIKEY SADDLER
 None of them would sleep with me
 willingly, Merritt. They's all
 thinkin' I'm too innocent. I had
 to force 'em, or they wouldn't do
 it. But I promise, I was gonna fix
 'em up ... once I could figure out
 what was wrong with their hearts.

Mikey is making his way toward Merritt.

JOHN MERRITT
 Well, if you're gonna fix their
 hearts, why are you trying to kill
 me?

MIKEY SADDLER
 Cuz you, and the Marshal, and that
 dumb ol' mortician are gonna keep
 comin' at me tryin' ta' stop me.
 He call's it murder.

JOHN MERRITT
 That's because it is!

Merritt manages to stand up just as Mikey makes his way across the floor.

MIKEY SADDLER

(defensive and furious)

I DIDN'T MURDER 'EM! I DID IT TA'
FIX 'EM!

JOHN MERRITT

Then you really don't understand,
do you? You can't fix them. Once
you cut out their heart, it's over!
You can't put them all back
together and expect them to come
back to life!

MIKEY SADDLER

LIAR!

Mikey leans forward with a hard thrust of the knife toward Merritt's gut, but Merritt swings out of the way and lands a right chop onto the kid's arm knocking the knife from his hand.

Mikey holds his arm for a second as he pulls it away from Merritt, but it doesn't seem the chop did enough damage as Mikey pushes forward and tackles Merritt to the ground.

He pulls up and tries to take a swing with his fist, but lands it against Merritt's shoulder as Merritt deflects it with a block of his own, and with the other fist lands a dead-on punch to Mikey's face, effectively knocking him backward to land with his back on Merritt's legs.

Merritt rolls from underneath and stands up, and Mikey is already doing the same, holding a hand to his own face.

MIKEY SADDLER

That actchally hurt, Mr. Merritt.

JOHN MERRITT

It's going to get worse, the more
you fight me, Mikey. You can't win
this fight.

MIKEY SADDLER

We'll see about that!

Mikey moves in close and takes a hard jab at Merritt's gut. Merritt permits the fist, but as he raises his leg to kick at Mikey, his body moves back enough to not take the brunt of the fist attack.

Instead, though, Mikey is too close, and Merritt's kick hits Mikey square in the stomach knocking him about ten feet back against a post.

Mikey laughs it off and comes right back at Merritt with full fury and force to tackle him.

Merritt makes an open-palmed hit at Mikey's face, hitting his nose. Mikey's face stops, but his body doesn't. Instead, he falls backward, landing on the ground hard, his nose bleeding.

Slowly, his eyes roll up in the back of his head.

At first, Merritt is ready for more, but then he sees something ... the butt of the knife he'd knocked from the young man's hand.

He pulls up on Mikey's body to realize that the edge of the butch knife got twisted facing upward, and just severed the back of Mikey's neck.

Blood gushes from the wound.

Merritt somewhat breathes a sigh of relief, and most likely frustration.

He turns his head back toward Rayanne and Wilson.

JOHN MERRITT

It's over.

He stands up straight as Wilson runs over to see what has happened.

Rayanne unlocks the door for the Marshal who enters with the hound and they all gaze upon the sight of the young, disturbed male whose body now seems at ease.

Merritt looks at the Marshal,

JOHN MERRITT

So much for that reward...

The Marshal looks at Merritt, shakes his head and rolls his eyes.

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, MARSHAL'S OFFICE - MID MORNING, NEXT DAY

Outside in the streets the town's residents go about their routine once more.

Merritt sits in the chair across the Marshal's desk as the Marshal walks in with a handful of papers with the word "REWARD" on them.

He slaps them down on his desk, grabs the last one from his own bulletin board, and puts it down on top of the others. Then he reaches in his vest pocket and pulls out a wad of bills.

WADE LUDERMAIN
As promised, Merritt.

JOHN MERRITT
...But I accidently killed him.

WADE LUDERMAIN
...But he was alive when you brought 'im to me.

JOHN MERRITT
What about Wilson and ol'
"Rough'n'Ready?" Don't they get
some of this?

WADE LUDERMAIN
I ain't stupid, Merritt. I split
it three ways. You got one third.

Merritt smiles and looks down at the wad of cash and starts to count it out with a shake of his head.

He doesn't bother to go far into a count. Instead, he rolls it back up and puts it in his shirt pocket.

JOHN MERRITT
How's his family taking this?

WADE LUDERMAIN
(shaking his own head)
Not well. I ended up tellin' 'em
it was an accident what killed 'im,
but that we figured out who the
culprit was and brought 'im ta'
justice.

JOHN MERRITT
You don't ever intend to tell them
the truth, do you.

WADE LUDERMAIN

That'd crush poor Cindy, and ruin their family in this here community. It's against my conscience, Merritt.

JOHN MERRITT

Good. It's better this way, I suppose.

There's a moment's pause, and then

WADE LUDERMAIN

What're you gonna' do with yer share o' the money?

JOHN MERRITT

Most of it's going to my little girl ... that's for sure.

WADE LUDERMAIN

You're not plannin' on payin' fer another night in the "Dusty Dudes?"

JOHN MERRITT

What, and spend another day in this town and let you find another way to trick me into hanging out here even longer? Heck, no, Marshal. I intend on leaving this town before nightfall...

At this, Merritt stands up and heads toward the door.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Merritt, before you go...

Merritt turns around, and when the Marshal doesn't finish,

JOHN MERRITT

Yes, Marshal?

WADE LUDERMAIN

Thanks for yer help. I couldn'a done it without ya'.

Merritt nods and exits the door.

EXT. KANSAS TOWN STREETS - MID MORNING

He walks across the street and goes into the "Dusty Dudes" saloon where Rayanne is already back at work cleaning up, a large bandage tied around her arm where she was cut.

RAYANNE POTTER

It's a little early ta' be
drinkin', ain't it, Merritt?

Merritt takes a seat at the bar, slaps down a fifty cent piece and says,

JOHN MERRITT

Nope. A beer, please.

She looks him up again, turns around with a pout and fills a mug of beer, turns again and slams it down in front of him with out a spill.

JOHN MERRITT

That's the coolest trick I ever did
see. How do you keep from spilling
that stuff everywhere when you do
that?

RAYANNE POTTER

(smiles)
Practice.

JOHN MERRITT

Still a crack shot, huh? The flee
off a dog's nose...

RAYANNE POTTER

...at one hundred paces.

She nods.

JOHN MERRITT

You wanna tell me how you really
got that nickname...?

RAYANNE POTTER

Not really.

She smiles at him, and he knowingly smiles back and takes a long swig at his beer.

He gets about half way through it before stopping and setting it down.

JOHN MERRITT

I'm real sorry about Rosie. I really liked her.

RAYANNE POTTER

Me, too. She was one o' my favorite girls, she was. Always nice, polite... She...

As she's about to say something else, in walks Mortimer Randall who walks up to the bar and sits down beside Merritt. Rayanne goes back to cleaning.

MORTIMER RANDALL

Marshal told me you were here.

JOHN MERRITT

What do you want?

MORTIMER RANDALL

I just wanted to talk.

(BEAT)

My niece told me you two met.

JOHN MERRITT

We did, briefly.

MORTIMER RANDALL

She said she likes you.

JOHN MERRITT

You wouldn't've known it from the attitude she gave me when I told her I was a Union Colonel.

MORTIMER RANDALL

Yeah, I mentioned that you couldn't have known she was there.

JOHN MERRITT

Still, she seems to hold a grudge.

MORTIMER RANDALL

You must understand, Merritt,
 (leans back a bit and
 turns to look at him)
 my niece's family was killed down there. That's why she's living up here with me, now.

Merritt looks at the mortician for a brief moment, and takes another chug on his beer.

JOHN MERRITT

I understand.

MORTIMER RANDALL

She doesn't hold it against you personally, but she can't possibly like you as anything more than a friend.

JOHN MERRITT

She can't, huh?

MORTIMER RANDALL

No, Merritt. She can't.

Merritt chugs down the last bit of beer in his mug and stands up.

JOHN MERRITT

Well, that's alright, Mortimer. Tell your niece I'm sorry that I ruined things for her by being on the other side of the war, and that I'm sorry things can't be different, now.

Mortimer stands up again and turns to Merritt with a hand out to shake. Merritt takes it and the two men amicably depart from the saloon as bells softly toll...

CUT TO:

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, CHURCH OF GOD - MID-AFTERNOON

...and toll again, a little louder each time, and then...

CUT TO:

INT. KANSAS TOWN, CHURCH OF GOD - MID-AFTERNOON

MINISTER

God saw his heart was hurting, and brought him home to stay. May God have mercy on us this day, and bless the family of our dearly departed brother, little Mikey Saddler. Amen.

CONGREGATION:

AMEN.

Merritt is seated in the crowd a few pews back, and soon...

CUT TO:

INT. KANSAS TOWN, CHURCH OF GOD - MID-AFTERNOON

...is standing in a line of people with Wade Ludermain, Robert Wilson, and Rayanne Potter, waiting to pass by the casket and family of Mikey Saddler.

None of the four of them spend more than a few seconds at the casket, but each of them takes their time in front of the family nodding.

It is painfully evident that the family holds Merritt, Wilson, and Rayanne personally responsible for Mikey's death, but they accept their condolences graciously, and soon...

CUT TO:

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, CHURCH OF GOD - MID-AFTERNOON

The family exits the door behind the pall bearers who carry the casket out between the gathered guests to the cemetery for burial.

The service is silent as the deed is completed, and shoveling of the dirt back into the hole is begun...

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXT. KANSAS TOWN, DUSTY DUDE'S SALOON - LATE AFTERNOON

Merritt has some supplies in a bag he's hanging from the side of his saddle. Marshal and Wilson walk up to him.

ROBERT WILSON
Where ya' off to, Merritt? Parts
unknown?

Merritt looks at him real quick with a squint in his eyes because of the sun,

JOHN MERRITT
I'm heading home, Wilson.

ROBERT WILSON
Where's home?

WADE LUDERMAIN

Ohio...

ROBERT WILSON

Ohio?! What's in Ohio?

JOHN MERRITT

My daughter...

Wilson has a look of surprise.

ROBERT WILSON

Yer like a seven-layer cake,
Merritt, a different flavor on ever
layer. Next yer gonna tell me yer
married!

JOHN MERRITT

I was ... once.

The Marshal butts in

WADE LUDERMAIN

Finally pulled yourself together,
Merritt...?

JOHN MERRITT

No, Marshal. We men have a God-
given responsibility to raise our
children, I believe you told me.

Wade's mouth slowly pulls back into a smile.

WADE LUDERMAIN

Good fer you, Merritt. Good fer
you.

Merritt turns around to the two men and shakes each of their
hands in turn.

ROBERT WILSON

Good luck to ya', Merritt. Maybe
we'll meet again some day.

Merritt mounts his horse as he pulls the tie loose from the
railing, smiles at Wilson and says,

JOHN MERRITT

Maybe, Wilson.

The horse with Merritt on it trots off toward the west, and
Merritt adds once out of earshot

JOHN MERRITT
I sure hope not.

FADE TO:

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF CINCINNATI, OHIO - TWO DAYS LATER

Merritt rides his horse into town, passing stores and homes. Most people wave as if they remember him, and he nods and waves back.

Some look iffy at seeing him, not sure if they're glad he's back in town or not.

A handful of people nod and wave happily at him, and yet another handful don't seem to give him the time of day.

It's been a long ride, evidenced by the dust on his clothes, and the signs that they need washed in the worst way. His hair is windswept, and he looks saddle-sore.

He pulls his horse up to the post office, ties his horse up, goes inside,

INT. CINCINNATI OHIO POST OFFICE - DAY

...and waits in line to see the teller, BROTHER ROGER.

There are two people in front of him getting stamps, and finally he's next in line.

BROTHER ROGER
Next ... oh, hello, John.

JOHN MERRITT
Hello, Brother Roger. I just want to make sure my mail's been getting to my daughter. Is everything alright with her?

BROTHER ROGER
I've got a letter for her here from you. They haven't picked it up, yet. Annabelle's fine. Growin' up to be a fine little lady. She'd love to see you again.

JOHN MERRITT
How do you think her grandparents will feel.

BROTHER ROGER

I wouldn't concern myself with that if I were you. Not if your daughter's the one you're here to see.

(pause)

You want to take her the letter yourself?

JOHN MERRITT

That would be great, Brother Roger.

The teller steps back into the mailroom a few moments and comes back out with the letter.

BROTHER ROGER

Here ya' go.

(BEAT)

Good to see you again. Plannin' on stayin' a while?

JOHN MERRITT

I was thinking about it, if this town will still have me.

BROTHER ROGER

There may be some hard feelings, but if you put forth an effort, I've no doubt in my mind the past will be forgotten.

Merritt nods his head and exits the post office with letter in hand.

EXT. CINCINNATI, OHIO, MERRITT FAMILY HOME - LATE MORNING

Merritt rides up to the exquisite, high-income home his parents live in, evidenced by the sign above the entry-way on the patio: "The Merritts."

As his horse pulls up, the screen door opens and out pops a six-year-old girl with a beautiful dress, ANNABELLE MERRITT...

ANNABELLE MERRITT

DADDY! DADDY!

She runs out the door, down the steps, down the path to the picket fence gate.

Merritt hops the gate and bends to pick up his girl with both arms. He wraps her up tight as she hugs his neck like only a loving six-year-old daughter could for her dad.

They hold each other a long moment while his parents exit the home, the mom smiling and crying to see such a beautiful sight, the dad with a semi-frown at the sight of his wayward son returning home.

ANNABELLE MERRITT

Daddy, I wanna show you what I'm doing in school! I learnt my ABCs and 123s!

Merritt smiles big at his little girl.

JOHN MERRITT

I can't wait, dear! I want to know everything you've been doing, and I want to meet your friends, and I want to take you to school.

He's almost in tears now himself, but with uncertainty how to show emotion to this incredibly satisfied young child.

His parents walk out to greet him as well.

JOHN MERRITT

Hi, Dad. Hi, Mom.

He hugs them each in turn.

John Merritt is the spitting image of his dad, SHAWN MERRITT, but younger. His dad, however, has a bit of a pot-belly and some scowl lines. It's evident he was once a husky man with some pretty large muscles to show for it, but not using them anymore has made him fatten up a bit.

His mom, FANNY MERRITT, is about 4'8", squat and plump, with a warm, motherly smile, and looks like the kind of woman who spends all her day cleaning a house and baking pies for the neighbors.

SHAWN MERRITT

Where ya' been, son?

JOHN MERRITT

Around. Stayed in Tennessee a few weeks ... Arkansas a couple of months ... Springfield, Missouri for a little over a year, and just got back from the town of Kansas, Missouri.

FANNY MERRITT

Annabelle's missed you so. She's
asked every day when you were
comin' home.

Merritt looks at his daughter who looks right back at him.

ANNABELLE MERRITT

I'm glad you're home, daddy.

JOHN MERRITT

Me, too, sweetheart.

SHAWN MERRITT

Just tell me you're here to stay
for a while.

FANNY MERRITT

Now, now, Shawn.

JOHN MERRITT

It's alright, Mom. I understand.
(looking his dad square in
the eyes)

No, dad, I'm here to stay for good.

At this, Shawn smiles, pats his son on the back, and the four
of them walk inside with laughs and smiles as we...

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END