One Can Have Her
– a game noir by Jonas Karlsson

A game in black-and-white inspired by film noir. Driven men in a dark underworld trying to stay alive long enough to set things straight. The Police Chief's daughter seducing them all, but only one can have her. If one of them rats on the others he gets the girl and peace of mind, but the rest of them die. If two of them rat, there are no winners.

Introduction

I tried to force myself to think I needed her like I needed four thumbs. It didn't work, she was still everything, so I tried another one: I told myself I needed her like I needed a hole in the head. That's when her father's men crashed through the door with their guns drawn to help me get one.

Something has gone wrong in the lives of the characters, and it's up to them to set things straight. But the clock is ticking, so they'll have to make sure they get whatever they want done before things come to an end. It's going to end, one way or another.

One Can Have Her is a game inspired by film noir for one game master (GM) and two or more players. The players create a male noir character each, a player character (PC), and start the game with something bad happening to the characters that draws them into the underworld. The players frame their own scenes in noir voice-over style, with the opposition of the scene played by the GM. From scene 4 to scene 6 the game might end by the roll of a die, otherwise it'll end on round 7. The players have their characters following a drive, something that sets them in motion in the first scene, that they want to complete before the game is over. Added to this is a femme fatale all player characters lust to make their girlfriend, but only one can have her. If one of them rats on the others and sells them to the police, he might resolve his drive and walk away with the girl. If more than one rat on the others, all of them end up in jail or die.

To play the game you need paper, pens, a deck of cards and a six-sided die.

24hour RPGs and the Ronnies

This is a 24-hour RPG, meaning that I've written it in 24 hours between 5th and 6th of September 2005, and will submit it to the 24hour RPG website (http://24hourrpg.com/). I also chose to limit myself a bit to make the game eligible for a Ronny, an award announced by Ron Edwards at the Forge. Games submitted between 4th and 24th of September which includes two of the four terms "suburb, hatred, girlfriend, rat" can win a Ronny.

Glossary

Conflict – Each scene has a conflict between a GM character and a PC or between two PCs, which is played out with playing cards.

Coolness Cards – Bonus cards players can award each other for doing cool stuff. They can be used as bonus cards on any side in any conflict.

Drive – Something that motivates the character to action throughout the game.

Epilogue – The description of what the end looks like for the character. Determined and presented by the player of the character.

Game Master (GM) – Person who describe locations, play the opposition and decide the order of the PCs scenes during each round.

Introduction Monologue – Each scene starts with the player having an in-character monologue where he describe where the scene is and who's there.

Opposition Cards – Bonus cards the GM can add to his side in conflicts.

Player Character (PC) – Character controlled by a player. A male noir archetype.

Rat (on) – To tell Chief Morton, via one of his informants, bad things about the other PCs. All player knowledge is character knowledge and can be used when ratting. Players use rat notes before the last four scenes to signal to the GM.

Round – All PCs gets one scene during each round. In round 3 all characters will play their third scene.

Scene – Where players control their characters to try to achieve their goals or rat on other characters.

Stakes –Formulated as an or-question before a conflict, "Will I sneak past the guards unnoticed or will they notice me?", spelling out the two alternatives.

Turn – Each conflict is separated into three turns, which signify three exchanges during the conflict. The winner of each turn describes what happens in the turn.

Theme and Setting

One Can Have Her is a role-playing game set in the same world with the same characters as films noirs. The game is set in a city, unnamed or named by the group, with a number of people living in a morally grey world. This is where all characters in the game will be from, and I call it the underworld. The underworld is where people without morals meet, be they high or low, young or old. These people have found themselves in situations where there's no easy way out, and where crime and sin might be justifiable. They can be justified as means to an end for someone who's driven enough, or they could be what life's about for someone with a certain disposition.

In the underworld there's no clear right and wrong, and almost no one is altogether good or bad. The good policeman takes bribes and plants evidence, while the bad criminal is tortured without revealing his friends hideout place.

Desirable women are usually very dangerous, either because they have jealous husbands or because they want something that involves someone else getting hurt. This doesn't matter, since men on the self-destructive path of noir characters have more important things to worry about. To them, the femme fatales seem like angels, like a way out of the situation they are currently in. Some of them get the girl, and sometimes they live happily ever after, but too often the man is killed on the way or hopes he was when he realizes what his new girlfriend is up to.

My inspiration is from film noir, not noir fiction, so I have a very visual picture of what the imagined stuff should look like. My favorite films noirs are black-and-white, so this game should also be played in black-and-white. I'm not kidding. First of all, you're not allowed to describe stuff in other colors than black, white or different shades of grey. You can describe a man as having dark hair and light grey eyes. The easiest way to play in black-and-white, though, is to replace colors with other descriptors. Instead of saying that the man has light grey eyes, which doesn't say very much, you can describe the eyes as cruel, sad or angry. Instead

of saying that the exterior of the house is green, say that the paint is falling off or that it looks neat. Play in black-and-white to get a nice noir feeling.

When it's dark it's really dark. People can hide in shadows and there's always things happening in claustrophobic rooms hidden behind closed venetian blinds, in dark alleys between houses or in the rear corner of the bar where the light doesn't reach. Garbage-filled back-alleys lie next to smoke-filled bars with underworld characters cutting deals that doom them. The streets are always wet, dark or neon-lit, sometimes with water running down filthy gutters.

You can set the game in a big city, a small town or a location in the country if you want to. The first one is the default setting, with the others available for single scenes if a character travels somewhere to meet someone. Feel free to set the game in real-world Los Angeles 1940 if you like, or keep the city ambiguous, unnamed and unknown.

Characters

Regular people are dependable, boring and completely useless for members of the underworld. Underworld people are caricatures of normal people, with one trait overemphasized and blown out of proportion. A normal boxer win some and lose some, while an obsessed underworld boxer aims for the highest prize and is prepared to pay anything to get there.

The GM plays all the people the player characters meet. Regular people will rarely be interesting, but use the opportunity to make people of the underworld memorable. The PCs aren't going to meet any prominent females of the underworld; the only female character they should meet is the femme fatale Ms. Lula Morton. The characters are supposed to chase the same girl, not one girl each.

The GM has two characters that exist in every game: Police Chief Willie Morton and his daughter Ms. Lula Morton. Chief Willie is important because the PCs need someone to sell the others to, when they want to steal the dream future with Lula in front of the other players' eyes.

Ms. Lula Morton

Lula is a dangerous girl to know, but well worth any trouble a man would go through to get. She's everything a man could want, literally. She has more sides than a role-player's dice collection, and every man she meets sees his own dream future in her. If he wants a girl that takes care of the house and kids, he'll see Lula as a perfect future housewife. If he wants intellectual stimulation he'll picture endless intriguing conversations, and if he wants status in society he'll see her as a ticket to it.

Lula Morton even changes her appearance and can fit in anywhere like a social chameleon. To some people she's the cold blonde in the gambling den, to others she's the short haired tomboy auto mechanic and that's only two of her many sides. If none of the players have any special opinions on her appearance it's always easier if she changes her personality rather than her looks, especially if she ends up in the same scene as two or more player characters.

What the players write as their characters' dream future with Lula on their character sheets will decide how the GM presents her in scenes with the character. It doesn't matter if their views of Lula seem to contradict each other, she can be anything to anyone.

Lula is a master of manipulation and gets information on the underworld carried to her by countless men. Her weapons of choice against men are seduction, jealousy and blackmail. She'll tell every man what he wants to hear, and if that doesn't win him over she'll tell him things he doesn't want to hear. This could be how good other men are or how everyone else is mean to her and that the man she's speaking to is the only one that can save her. She'll talk about the character's dream future and how it's a real possibility, if he only rats on some other people.

The GM should make sure that Lula is involved enough in each character's story to make her a tempting goal. If she's too distant and uninvolved the players will feel like it's an unnecessary risk to try to get her. If their character, on the other hand, has helped her willingly or unwillingly during the game, they'll more likely feel like she belongs to them and will try to incorporate her into their epilogue.

Police Chief Willie Morton

Chief Morton is the head of police in the town where the game takes place. He's an honest man and isn't part of the underworld of the player characters. Chief Willies world is black and white, either you're an honest man and then you have nothing to fear, or you're scum and should be put behind bars. The Chief is too busy to handle interactions with the underworld himself, but has a small army of informants and uniformed cops that does the leg-work for him.

Chief Morton will usually not show up in the game, but will be a constant threat to every member of the underworld. If someone wants to tell him something the way to go is through one of his informants, and the information will reach him. All player characters will probably be in situations where they don't want to be to close to the Chief of Police before things are solved. On the other hand, they'll all want his daughter, so they'll have to find a way to make friends with him.

Player Characters

The players should create their characters together and feel free to help each other with suggestions. If there's something one player would like to add to another player's character to make it more interesting, they're very encouraged to do so. Nothing of the characters is secret, and all players should know the drives and dream future of all other characters. There's no difference between player and character knowledge; all characters know everything about each other. This information could be very valuable for Chief Morton; either the others' criminal past, their actions during the game or their plans for themselves and his daughter.

All player characters are male, who might or might not have a family, that live in the morally-grey underworld of the city. If they belong to high society, they're for some reason involved with people of questionable value. They could for example be a corrupt politician who uses money loaned from gangsters to pay for political campaigns. If the character belongs to the absolute bottom of society, they have something to offer people in higher standing. They could be a hardboiled private eye that sells his dirty services to clients who want his services, but don't want to be connected with him. The game will start with something bad happening to the character, something that will drive him forward. On the way to the end he'll meet, and possibly fall for, Ms. Lula Morton.

The character needs to be a noir archetype. An archetype could be something like: Alienated Government Agent, Brooding Police Officer, Conflicted Sports Hero, Corrupt Politician, Cynical Porn Producer, Disillusioned War Veteran, Down-and-Out Journalist, Guilt Wrecked Gangster, Hardboiled Private Detective, Insecure Petty Thief, Paranoid Insurance-Agent, Self-Centered Nightclub Singer or Sinister Murderer.

Please feel free to re-combine the adjectives with another occupation, or invent your own archetypes that seem to fit.

Each character will have a drive, something that's motivating him to act and to push himself forward. The exact drive is established in the first scene, but the player should've decided what it's about before the first scene, to know how to introduce the scene.

Another thing each character needs is a dream woman, someone he'll share his life with after struggles during the game are over. The player should also write down the dream ending with Ms. Morton, the woman his character will meet, which will be some ideal future if everything turns out the way the character wants.

Each character will start with 2 Coolness Cards.

The players should write their name (their own or their character's) on 8 notes of paper together with "Rat" on 4 of them and "Don't rat" on 4 notes. These are called rat notes, and will be used in the final four scenes to know if the character sells the other characters to the police or not. The reason they are written now and not when they're used is to prevent people from knowing what other player's will do by how long it takes to write the note.

You can find a character sheet at the end of the game.

Bonus Cards

Both the GM and the players have bonus cards they can add to conflicts. You can either write the number of bonus cards on a piece of paper, or represent them with glass beads, small stones or uncooked macaroni.

Coolness Cards

The players, not the GM, can award each other bonus cards from the Coolness Pool if they think another player does something cool or entertaining. This can be a cool introduction monologue, a dialogue, stakes or narrations in a conflict, a suggestion for someone else's scene or anything else. It's up to the players to set the standard for what deserves a Coolness Card and what doesn't. Remember that the Coolness Cards are awarded to the player and not the character; you don't have to like the character to think that the player is entertaining. The Coolness Cards exist to promote players entertaining each other and to give instant feedback, but they also give the players an opportunity to befriend the other players before their characters rat on each other.

Used Coolness Cards turn back into Opposition Cards and can be used by the GM again.

Opposition Cards

Opposition Cards are cards that the GM can add to his side in conflicts. He gets an amount of cards equal to the number of players times 10. Every opposition card used goes into the Coolness Pool.

Scenes

The game is played in up to seven scenes requested by the players. Before each of the last four scenes the players hand over their rat notes to the GM. This way the GM knows if he should insert a supporting character working for Chief Morton in the scene or not. The main reason for using notes is that the players shouldn't know what the others are choosing, since that would take away the whole dilemma of knowing when to rat on the others.

Scene Order
Scene 1: Drive Scene

Scenes 2-3: Escalation Scenes

Scenes 4-6: Resolution Scenes

Scene 7: End Scene

In the Drive Scene the character's motivation and reason to be in the game should be made clear. The player should know more or less what the drive will be from creating the character, but it will nevertheless be played out to see what really happens. In the scene introduction the player should briefly present the character and his background to the other players, but they can really say whatever they want. It's important that the scene conflict in the drive scene isn't "Will I resolve the drive" in some form, since that would take away the point of the drive in the game. Conflicts related to the drive are fine.

The Escalation Scenes are where the drive is followed. The character's situation should go from bad to worse, and he should find out that things are bigger and more involved than he thought. Ms. Lula Morton should make an appearance in at least one of the two scenes, but if it fits she can be in both. There's no risk of the game ending during the Escalation Scenes, so the characters are free to get involved with Lula and follow their drives.

The Resolution Scenes play out as Escalation Scenes, with one important difference. Before each Resolution Scene the players should hand over a rat note. If the note says "Rat" the character will be joined by one of Chief Morton's men in the scene so he can spill his beans, otherwise things continue as before. You

always rat on all the other characters, and you can't choose to just rat on one of them.

If the character is ratted on by someone else in this round, he'll also be joined by Chief Morton's men in his scene, but now they'll be hostile. The stakes of the scene conflict will most likely have something to do with evading the police. The character that's been ratted on will immediately realize who has sold him out, so you don't have to separate character and player knowledge when deciding whether to rat in the next scene. If someone is supposed to rat and is ratted on in the same round, make sure that he gets a chance to tell the police about the others before they attack or that they attack and force him to tell.

The GM should keep introducing Lula as many times as possible, preferably having her mention how good the other characters are to make the current character jealous or talk about their dream future together.

The End Scene is the last scene of the game, if it hasn't come to an end earlier. The players could place all characters in the same scene for a last shootout, or they could go their separate ways to meet their own ends.

Scene Introduction

The GM decides the order the players get their scenes, based on which player has waited the longest, who seems most eager or who has just ratted on the others. You could for example place people who are ratting before the people they rat on, if you want to warn the player that was ratted on. If there's only one rat you can place him first in the round, so that the rest can weave their suspicion and paranoia into their introduction monologues. If more than one has ratted this'll not be possible, and the first player will have policemen entering his scene without knowing beforehand who sent them. In that case the GM should tell him which other character has ratted on him, either through dialogue from the police or by clues the player character picks up some other way. Either case, both the character and the player should get to know who the rat is, and in the worst case the GM will just have to tell him who after the scene is played out.

Each scene should be introduced by the player, with a short in-character monologue describing where he is and what's going on. Try to aim for the noir style of witty phrases ("I'm an occasional drinker, the kind of guy who goes out for a beer and wakes up in Singapore with a full beard") and ridiculous similes ("She smelled the way the Taj Mahal looks by moonlight"). You shouldn't care if the similes don't make sense; just try to be as cool as possible to earn Coolness Cards from the other players.

Other things to include are which characters the player wants present in the scene, and what's happened since the last scene. When the introduction monologue is over the GM steps in and describes the relevant setting and characters in more detail if needed. The player shouldn't be afraid to be very vague in the introduction and hint at things no-one at the table knows, as long as it's setting the mood for the scene. Since the GM has no story of his own going on, the player can invent and introduce any place or person he feels like. If he needs suggestions he can ask the GM and the other players before the monologue starts, but nothing gets decided until after the monologue. There's a list of places and people on the character sheet in the back, to help people get creative. Don't feel restrained to them, though, invent away.

Players can tell others they want their character to be in the same scene as the other character. You can have all characters in the same scene if you want to, especially in scene 7 as you know it'll be the last scene. Everyone still needs to do a short monologue to position their character in the scene, but they don't need to repeat places and persons that players before them have already added.

Scene Conflict

Each scene should contain one conflict per PC, and all conflicts will be resolved together. Play the scene until the situation has reached a clear point where you'll need to decide what direction the story will go. Set the stakes for the conflict in the form of an or-question, like "Will the gangster reveal where the kidnapped girl is peacefully or will things turn violent?". Both sides has to agree to the stakes, but exactly happens is going to be up to the person who wins the conflict.

Now you switch to another player and play his scene until you reach an interesting conflict, set the stakes there and keep switching until every player character is in a conflict.

If the scene is a Resolution Scene there's a risk that the game will end when everyone has entered conflicts, but before they have been played out. Roll a six-sided die and see if the value is less than the scene number (4, 5 or 6). If it is the game ends, otherwise you'll have another round. Obviously you don't have to roll the die in scene 7 as it'll surely be the last scene of the game. If a character was ratted on by someone this round Chief Morton's men will be in the scene. If the die says it's the last scene, there's no need to go through with conflict resolution for this character. He automatically loses the stakes and is either put behind bars or shot dead by the police. The choice is up to the player, who gets to tell the character's epilogue after the others have finished their scenes. If the character wasn't ratted on in this round, the conflict is played as normal.

The GM will play a card game against all players consecutively. How to do that is described below; just repeat it for all conflicts at the table. Note that the GM and players must play all Opposition and Coolness Cards before starting to flip cards for the first player. After you have started flipping, you can't add any more cards to the conflicts.

The player and GM places three cards face down on the table. Each card represents a turn, an exchange in the conflict. The GM can add Opposition Cards to his side and any player can add Coolness Cards to any side of the conflict. There always has to be more cards in later turns than earlier, meaning that if I add one card I can only add it to turn 3 and if add another I can either put it in turn 2 or turn 3. The GM can add up to 5 cards, the players can add any number of Coolness Cards they have available.

When all cards have been added, both sides say what they attempt in the first turn and flip the cards for turn 1. Red cards are successes while black cards are failures. The side with most red cards wins the turn, and gets to narrate what happens in the turn. If there's an equal amount of successes the turn is a draw,

and neither side has an advantage. The side with the highest card gets to narrate. If that doesn't solve who narrates, draw a new card each and compare the value, but don't count red cards as extra successes.

After narrating turn 3 the side with the highest total number of successes in the conflict gets to conclude it and close the scene.

It's possible that two players with characters in the same scene want a conflict with each other. This is fine; they'll play each other as if they were playing the GM. All players can add Coolness Cards to the conflict, but the GM can't add Opposition Cards. The player-vs.-player conflict replaces the GM controlled scene conflict.

Ending the Game

The game ends after scene 4, 5, 6 or 7. When it does, the characters can be in a couple of situations. They'll all tell their character's epilogue, in a way that reflects the situation he's in. The GM decides the order of the epilogues.

Characters that were ratted on during the end round meet a bad end. They either end up in jail or dead, depending on the player's wishes. They don't manage to resolve the drive, and everything about the drive turns out the worst possible way. The player describes how the character loses the stakes in the current conflict and what his end is, and what happens to other characters close to his.

If the character wasn't ratted on during the round and didn't rat on anyone else, his epilogue should describe how he resolves his drive and what happens to his and other characters dependent on him afterwards. The character might or might not die or end up in jail, depending on what the player feels is fitting. He'll probably retire or pursue some career of the player's choice, perhaps even turning into a person not connected to the world of the underground.

If he ratted on the others but wasn't ratted on he gets Ms. Lula Morton and resolves his drive. He gets to describe what happens to them, if they stay or run, as well as what happens to characters relevant to his drive. He also gets to decide if the character gets his dream future with Lula or not.

Character Sheet

Character name:

Noir archetype:

Drive:

Dream Woman and Your Future Together:

Coolness Cards (start with 2):

Example Places and Characters

Places	People
Alcohol-Smelling Taxi	Charles Mendl
Busy Newspaper Office	Eddie Farnham
Claustrophobic Attic	George Melbeck
Closed Hardware Store	Gordon Cochrane
Crowded Sidewalk	Hank Quinlan
Dark Back-Alley	Joe Peters
Decrepit Farm	John Ballantine
Deserted Park	Lester Townsend
Dimly-Lit Apartment	Mark Halliday
Empty Warehouse	Paul Prescott
Fog-Covered Airfield	Phillip Aysgarth
Full Bar	Ricardo Costa
Neon-Lit Street	Sam Garlopis
Remote Luxury Villa	Tony Wendice
Sweat-Smelling Locker Room	Victor Swann
Smoke-Filled Detective's Office	Walter Neff
Venetian-Blinded Hotel Room	Wilhelm Renzler