

*In 1879 in Arizona Territory beautiful Ophelia Grayson hires deputy marshal Marcus Irons to hunt for gold treasure buried during the Civil War in the ruins of an ancient pueblo. But finding the gold will be difficult. So will surviving!*

## **Rim Country**

by James A. Janke

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A MARCUS IRONS WESTERN ADVENTURE

# RIM COUNTRY

The background of the cover is a photograph of ancient stone ruins in a desert landscape. The ruins are constructed from reddish-brown sandstone blocks and are partially collapsed, showing signs of significant age and weathering. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The overall scene is one of a remote, historical site in a rugged, arid environment.

JAMES A. JANKE

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# Chapter One

*Summer 1879*  
*Arizona Territory*

Marcus Irons, deputy marshal of Madera Verde, lurched back in his chair in the marshal's office and clapped his hands to the sides of his head. "Oh, damn!"

Archibald Hardwick, owner, editor, reporter, and typesetter of the *Madera Verde Weekly Gazette* had just pinned Irons' queen with a rook. Suddenly Irons' chess game looked like a disaster.

Hardwick took off his glasses, fogged the lenses with his breath, and started wiping each lens with a handkerchief. "I love chess, Marcus," he said. "It's not like poker. Poker players—like yourself—hide their own assets and must speculate on the assets of other players, calculating the potential relative strengths of their positions, estimating, indeed guessing. But in chess, nothing is hidden. All positions are plainly visible." He put his glasses back on and waved a hand over the chessboard. "We can both see exactly where each other's pieces are on the board. Yet to win a contest, you—speaking in general—must envision where the pieces *should* be in the future." He smiled. "You didn't *see* my rook attack coming."

Irons lowered his hands to the small table on which the chessboard lay. He shook his head slowly. "Nope." He reached for the bottle of whiskey on the side of the table, pulled the cork, and poured about two fingers of dark liquid into his glass. He jammed the cork back in the bottle and set the bottle down. He slid the bottle toward Hardwick.

Hardwick shook his head slightly. "Later maybe."

Irons took just a sip of whiskey. It was evening and he wasn't officially on duty, but he *might* get called upon, and he wanted his wits about him. Of course, that was true all the time.

Not that he was a heavy drinker anyway. He had gotten completely drunk twice in his earlier days, and not remembering what he had done for hours or how he had gotten to where he had woken up had frightened him thoroughly. Moderation, Marcus, moderation.

Hardwick said, "Pinning is a particularly effective offensive strategy, Marcus."

"As you have demonstrated to me many times, Arch. Which you enjoy doin'."

Hardwick smiled. "Successful implementation of strategy *is* a pleasure,

Marcus. You should try it sometime.”

Irons grinned. “Smart ass,” he said. “You’re an evil man, Arch.”

Hardwick nodded acknowledgement and smiled again. “In chess that’s the ultimate compliment, Marcus.” He bowed. “I accept your encomium, humbly, of course.”

Irons chuckled. “Humbly, my ass.” Irons didn’t even know what encomium meant but he could guess. The editor would be insufferable if his smugness wasn’t fully justified.

Irons crossed his arms and rested them on the small table. He looked around, hoping for inspiration. He glanced through the door to the newspaper office that adjoined the marshal’s office. The two offices shared a small building with a door that gave access between the two.

There was still light in Hardwick’s office. The editor had neglected to douse a lantern when he had stepped next door to have another of their irregular evening games of chess.

Irons could see the bookshelves in the newspaper office containing Hardwick’s ample and eclectic collection of books. It was the main reason the deputy visited next door, looking for a book that might pique his interest. He usually kept several of Hardwick’s books in the room he rented at Rosie Mendoza’s boarding house.

Irons turned his gaze on Hardwick himself, who was still sitting there calmly waiting for Irons to commit chess suicide. Irons liked Hardwick. The editor was in his mid-50s, about twice Irons’ age. With a full gray beard, he resembled Robert E. Lee. Irons preferred to be smoothly shaven most of the time, except for a modest mustache.

Irons might even have considered Hardwick a bit of a father figure, but Irons had a father back in his native Wisconsin whom he admired greatly.

Irons looked at the door at the back of the marshal’s office that gave entrance to a four-cell jail. But he couldn’t take a break to go look in on the prisoners because there weren’t any. Which was too bad. Irons got two dollars for every arrest he made. That was a significant augmentation to his unimpressive monthly salary as a deputy marshal. Madera Verde’s city council was stingy.

Irons looked at Hardwick. “Well, what do I do now, Arch?”

“Take the rook with the queen, of course,” Hardwick said.

“But, Arch, you’ll then take my queen with your king. You told me a queen is worth twice as much as a rook.”

“Approximately, yes. But your only alternative is to mount an even more devastating attack on my position, like checking my king. Do you see such an

alternative, Marcus?"

"No," Irons said. "Do you?"

"No."

Irons guffawed. "Well, then there isn't one," he said. He sighed. "Well, hell." He took Hardwick's rook with his queen. "That was a dirty trick, Arch."

Hardwick immediately took the queen with his king. He set it down gently to the side of the board. "No trick, dirty or otherwise, Marcus. Rather, a valuable demonstration. A lesson. Lack of sufficient foresight with its painful consequences imparts valuable strategic wisdom, Marcus."

Irons rolled his eyes. He smiled, as did Hardwick.

A distant gunshot caused the smiles on their faces to fade.

Now, gunshots were not that uncommon in Madera Verde. This was cattle country, and there were many reasons why a gun could have been fired, even late at night as it was. Irons was sure that most people in town simply ignored the report. But he *was* the law in Madera Verde.

Hardwick noted Irons' pause. He said, "Did you find that shot of concern, Marcus?"

Irons shrugged. "Probably nothin'."

Two more gunshots sounded, close together. Both men raised their eyebrows.

Irons stiffened. "I thought I heard a woman scream." The windows in the marshal's office were open.

"I, as well, Marcus," Hardwick said. "And the short interval between those reports suggests an *exchange* of gunfire."

Irons quickly pushed his chair back and rose. He drew his pistol and checked the cylinder for six live rounds. It was a habit he observed diligently, even though he had never unexpectedly found a chamber holding a cartridge already fired.

He said, "I'm gonna take a look around."

"Investigate the saloons?"

"Where else." He holstered the weapon and headed for the door.

Hardwick gestured toward the chessboard. "Finish the game upon your return?"

Irons snorted, his hand on the doorknob. "You know you're gonna win, Arch. Again."

Hardwick said, "But there is value in playing to the complete denouement regardless of an expected untoward result, Marcus. That way you experience how an endgame should unfold."

Irons said, "Don't kid me, Arch. You're just a cruel man."

“Well, there is that, too, of course,” Hardwick admitted, smiling.

Irons laughed.

“But, Marcus, you learn by playing somebody *better* than you are, not *worse* than you are.”

Irons nodded. “Like gettin’ beat up by a man better with his fists than you are.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, okay. Leave the board like it is.”

Hardwick nodded. “I will leave the pieces on the field of battle where they now exist.”

Irons opened the door and stepped outside.

Hardwick called after him, “Be careful out there, Marcus.”

Irons said, “Yes, Mother.”

Hardwick smiled and leaned back in his chair.

Irons closed the door behind him.

He stepped off the boardwalk and stopped. He wanted to give his eyes a chance to adjust to the darkness; he couldn’t see much of anything otherwise. Regardless of the possible urgency, plunging blindly into hazard in the dark was a bad tactic.

It was quiet, as it usually was at that time of the evening in this part of town. He saw a few lights in residence windows in a back street, but he saw no one on any street. He did see a few dim lights in the saloons down at the next corner. But he didn’t hear anything coming from those establishments.

The temperature had dropped precipitously, as it did every night in desert country after another scorching day. But it was still warm. There was a light breeze.

He heard no further gunshots. That was encouraging.

He strode quickly westward on the dusty street, toward the saloons. He checked the shadows between buildings carefully.

It was *very* quiet. Usually, he could hear at least *something* from the saloons. They were not far away. Nothing was very far away in the small town of Madera Verde, of course, but there was a good reason that the marshal’s office was near the saloons.

He could distinctly hear his boots clumping in the dust of the street. And he could hear leaves rustling in the cottonwoods and willows that lined the small river just behind the marshal’s office. Irons always enjoyed that sound. Very peaceful, very soothing, especially at night when even the gurgling of the stream was audible.

He would be able to hear the sound of the trees all the way to the saloon

corner, for the town stretched tightly along the banks of the river. Indeed, all those trees gave the town its name – Green Wood—rendered in Spanish: Madera Verde.

Some people called the stream the Rio Verde, and it was a tributary of the larger Verde River to the west. But that was confusing, because Rio Verde meant Verde River, and both translated into Green River. So most people in town simply called it *the river*. Back in Wisconsin the water course would have been called nothing more than a creek.

Irons saw a man running down the street toward him. Irons stopped. He rested his hand on the butt of his pistol.

The approaching man suddenly halted, recognized Irons, and started running again. “Deputy! Marshal Irons!”

Irons noted the urgency in the man’s voice. The gunshots he and Hardwick had heard earlier obviously *had* been cause for concern.

The man came to a halt in front of Irons. He was panting and said nothing right away.

Irons recognized him. Nelson Adams, a cowhand with the Circle S.

“What’s happened, Nelson?”

“There’s—there’s been—a shootin’, marshal. In the saloon.”

“Which one, Nelson?” Irons asked, a bit exasperated. Madera Verde had three saloons in it, all on the same corner. That was why a small town like Madera Verde had both a city marshal and a full-time deputy.

“The Mogollon,” Nelson said.

Irons was not surprised. The Mogollon Saloon was the biggest, most popular saloon in town. The Aqua Fria Saloon was much smaller, and the El Vaquero Malo Cantina—the Vaquero, for short—was another small saloon, frequented mostly by Mexicans.

“What happened, Nelson?”

“A stranger shot Sandy Wilcox, marshal.”

“Damn,” Irons said. “Sandy Wilcox?” Sandy Wilcox seemed like an unlikely fellow to get himself shot in a saloon. Sandy worked in the general store as a clerk. “Is he dead?”

“No. At least, not yet. Sandy was still alive when I left the saloon.”

“Arch and I heard more than one shot,” Irons said.

“Yeah, Sandy got off a shot hisself,” Nelson said.

“Good for him. But I’m surprised Sandy even had a gun.”

“So was the stranger.”

Irons had to smile at that, but he quickly erased the grin. It wasn’t funny.

Nelson said, “He shot Sandy a second time.”



“Damn. Did Sandy hit the stranger with his shot?”

“Nah.”

“Damn again.” Irons shook his head. He asked, “Is the stranger still there?”

“Oh, yeah. Proud of himself. And nobody else’s left either. ‘Fraid to even move. That stranger is a wild hombre. Crazy man. He’s on his second bottle of whiskey.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

But Nelson said, “Doris said I should go get Doc Williams after I found you.”

“Smart lady,” Irons said. Doris Springfield was one of the two saloon girls who worked in the Mogollon. “Okay, get goin’.”

Nelson said nothing more. He took off at a trot heading farther up the street.

Irons trotted to the Mogollon. He held his hand on his pistol and holster to keep them from flapping on his hip.

He reached the Mogollon and hopped onto the boardwalk. But he stopped short of the door. The Mogollon had two big front doors with huge glass panes in them, but those doors were open and pressed against the exterior front wall of the building.

But the Mogollon did have a set of batwing doors, very practical in hot desert country with sultry evenings. And convenient for Irons to look over to size up the situation without drawing attention to himself—yet. Step one in the best tactics of a lawman: know what you’re heading into.

He surveyed the interior of the saloon. Almost all action—and talking—inside the saloon had stopped. Only a few tables had any men sitting at them; it was a Tuesday, not a Saturday. But those men were frozen in their seats.

Irons saw a man lying on his back on the floor next to a table. A pistol lay at his side. That man had to be Sandy Wilcox.

At the bar stood two local men he recognized and Doris. The men had shrunk back to one end of the bar. The bartender was backed up against the shelves of liquor bottles behind the bar. Doris stood with her back tight against the bar, her hands grasping the edge of the bar tightly. She was staring bug-eyed at a man two feet to her left.

That man was standing in about the middle of the bar. He was drinking straight from a whiskey bottle, holding it unsteadily with both hands. Irons didn’t recognize him, so that was Nelson’s stranger. An uncocked, single-action Colt lay on the bar next to the man.

Irons didn’t think the stranger looked like a cowboy. He was wearing a suitcoat, though it didn’t look either expensive or new. And he was wearing a fedora hat, not a regular cowboy hat. The man was swaying as he drank. He

had obviously had a lot to drink already.

Irons was ready for step two in the best tactics: get everyone's attention. He took a deep breath, stretched himself to his full height of six feet one inch, pushed open the batwing doors hard enough that they banged up against the inside wall, and stepped far enough inside so the batwing doors didn't hit him when they bounced back. That would have been comical. The sudden movement and loud bang caught people's immediate attention.

Step three: shut down the situation. He stopped and shouted, "Everybody, stay where you are." Then not so loudly but still with force, "And—don't—move." He separated each of those three words for effect. He hooked his left thumb in his gun belt and let his right hand dangle near his holster.

Nobody moved—other than flinching. Except for the stranger at the bar. He did keep moving. Startled, the man choked on his drink as he jerked his head around to stare at Irons. Liquor splashed down the front of his shirt. He tried to set the bottle on the countertop but dropped it. It fell to the floor and rolled a few feet to the side. Some liquor glugged out of the bottle onto the floorboards. The man blinked several times, trying to focus.

Irons said, "Mister, I'm Deputy Marshal Irons." He started walking slowly forward, keeping his eyes tightly on the drunk.

The other man glanced at the tin star on the left side of Irons' leather vest. He reached for the pistol on the bar with his right hand but fumbled the weapon.

"Don't," Irons said. He stopped again. His hand closed down on the butt of his own .45 Colt.

The stranger then used both hands and still fumbled the pistol. When he finally got a good grip on the gun with his right hand, it was hanging at his side. He hadn't cocked it.

"Don't!" Irons repeated, more loudly. He raised his left hand in a warning gesture; he tightened his grip on his pistol with his right.

The man hesitated. He was breathing heavily. Irons could see his thumb caressing the cylinder of his pistol while he was thinking, gauging odds, calculating. Blinking. Swaying.

Irons said, "Mister, if you cock that hammer, I will *kill* you."

The silence in the saloon was total.

Then Doris told the man, "Mister, you won't be the first man Marshal Irons has killed."

The drunk didn't move. He took a quick glance at Doris and then stared back at Irons. He kept swaying.

Irons went to step four: resolve the situation. He shouted, "Drop it!" He snatched his pistol from its holster and cocked it as he brought it up to point

directly at the drunk's chest.

The entire saloon gasped.

The drunk flinched and dropped the pistol and whipped his hands up. "Okay, okay."

"Good," Irons said. "I would've felt bad havin' to kill a man as drunk as you are."

The man bent his head down and glared at his pants. His mouth dropped open.

Irons saw the wet stain spreading from the man's groin. The stranger had pissed himself. Irons snorted.

He looked at Doris. "Doris, pick up his pistol."

"Yes, sir." She quickly bent down and picked up the man's pistol.

Irons walked up closer and took the pistol from Doris. He stuck it in the waistband of his pants. He kept his own pistol trained on the stranger but took his finger off the trigger.

He glanced down at Wilcox on the floor. The man was still breathing; Irons could see his chest rising and falling. There was a big patch of blood spreading on his shirt. He had been shot in the stomach. Not good news. Gut shots were hard to recover from. "Doris, tell me what happened here."

"Well, this stupid stranger here accused poor Sandy of cheatin' at cards."

"Was he?"

"Sandy Wilcox?" she said. "Don't be silly. He wasn't smart enough."

"Okay. And then?"

"The damned idiot knocked his chair over backwards, jumped to his feet, and shot poor Sandy, him just sittin' there. Sandy managed to jump to his feet anyway, drew his pistol and shot at the stranger, but the stranger shot Sandy again. *Jesus.*"

Irons said, "Nelson said this stranger wasn't hit, and I can see that. So, where did Sandy's bullet go?"

Doris jerked her thumb toward the back of the bar. "In the wall above the mirror."

Irons snorted. "Had Sandy been drinkin' heavily?"

"Yeah, just like the stranger here."

"Sober, they would've shot each other dead from this close range."

"Yeah," Doris said. "We all ducked for cover."

"Okay. Doris, you the one who screamed?"

"Hell, yeah!"

Irons smiled. "You're not hurt?"

"No."

He was glad Doris was unharmed. He liked her. She was a whore, of course, but a cheerful one. And talented. And attractive. And she didn't charge lawmen for her services. She had explained, "I want you to come runnin' if I ever call for help." Irons knew whoring was just a job to her. But he would, indeed, come running. Even if he had had to pay her.

Irons looked at the bartender, who was still frozen in one spot. "Louie, that the way you saw things go? The way Doris said?"

Louie said, "Yes, sir, marshal. That's what happened." Now he stepped closer to the bar. "Sure glad you got here, marshal. This jackass is a loose cannon. There was no tellin' what he would do next."

"Okay."

Irons addressed the stranger, still swaying in front of the deputy.

"Mister, you're goin' to my jail. Go quietly and meekly and I won't have to hurt you. Understood?"

The drunk nodded once with an unsteady jerk, as if he had trouble remembering how to nod.

Doc Williams hurried into the saloon with Nelson Adams trailing behind him. The doctor rushed to Wilcox's side. Other men started rising from their seats. Some rushed forward to look over the doctor's shoulder. The saloon got noisier.

Irons shifted to the drunk's right side and grabbed the man's right arm with his own left hand, not gently. He kept his pistol in his right hand. "Let's go." He gave the man a jerk.

They started walking slowly toward the front door. Irons couldn't go very fast because the drunk was having trouble walking.

"For shootin' Sandy Wilcox you're gonna be in my jail a long time, mister," Irons said.

"I suppose," the stranger mumbled.

"But if he dies," Irons said, "like I think he's gonna die, it'll be a *short* time."

The stranger looked at Irons. "Short time? Why short?"

"Cuz then we'll take you outside and hang you."

The blood drained from the stranger's face.

## Chapter Two

A little after 8:00 am the next morning Irons walked across the street to Madera Verde's only hotel, the Madera Verde Hotel. A small bell tinkled as he opened the door. He closed the door quietly behind himself. The little bell tinkled again.

He started walking briskly toward the front desk, where a clerk waited behind it. The hotel's dining room was to his left, and he casually glanced into it, curious about any patrons. A few guests were having breakfast. There were several men there, each alone, and one couple. And at the table closest to the dining room archway sat a young woman daintily eating some hotcakes.

The beauty of the young woman was so striking that Irons' next step took twice as long as each of his previous steps. She had an oblong face with high cheek bones, enticingly large blue eyes, a pointed nose, and a narrow mouth with full lips. The skin on her cheeks was almost white and obviously very smooth. A bonnet was resting on the table, and her loose blonde hair reached a foot below the collar of the voluminous, light-yellow dress she was wearing. The sleeves of the dress reached down to her wrists. It looked uncomfortable in the heat. But the dress still accentuated the young woman's full figure.

Irons immediately fantasized having the young woman lying naked on top of him with their cheeks pressed together and all those blonde tresses cascading over his shoulders.

He kept walking, almost a stroll, and kept staring at the woman. His progress toward the front desk slowed to a crawl.

The clerk, perhaps impatient, said, "Marshal Irons. Good morning to you, sir."

Irons was surprised when the young woman snapped her head around to look at him. Her fork froze in the air, and her mouth hung open.

Irons visualized slowly searching into her open mouth with his tongue. He sensed an erection rising. He felt almost embarrassed, though he doubted the erection was visible to others. He touched the brim of his hat and nodded slightly to the young woman.

She quickly looked back at her fork and grabbed a mouthful of hotcake.

Irons reached the front desk and turned his attention to the clerk. He rested his hands on the countertop. "Yes, well, good mornin', Mr. Hudson."

Hudson asked, "What can I do for you, sir?"

"Well, uh, George, you probably heard about the shootin' in the Mogollon Saloon last night."

"Whole town knows about that by now, Marcus. Word has it, sir, that you

did an admirable job of shutting down that miscreant.”

“Well, it was my job, George.”

“Nevertheless—well done, sir.”

“Ok, thank you.”

“Too bad about Sandy Wilcox.”

“Yes.”

“Is he still with us?”

“Far as I know. I’ll be checkin’ on him after this.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, the man who shot him calls himself Cameron Billings. He said he was stayin’ at the hotel.”

“Ah, yes,” Hudson said. He swiveled his registration book around so he could read it. “Yes, Cameron Billings. From Santa Fe.” He swiveled the book back around. “Arrived just yesterday.”

Irons nodded. “Okay. Well, that’s more than we knew about him before I got here. His name was all we could get outa him last night. And that he was stayin’ here.”

“Probably recognizes the serious trouble he’s in.”

“He should. Anyway, what else do you know about him? Did he come alone?”

“There was no one else with him when he registered.”

“Did he meet anybody here in the hotel?”

“Not that I noticed.”

“Did you ask why he was in Madera Verde?”

“Certainly not,” Hudson said. “It’s hotel policy to mind our own business. He didn’t say and I didn’t ask.”

“Right, of course. Well, at least you can tell me if he arrived by stage.”

“No, he didn’t. He asked where he could stable his horse. I gave him the names of both the liveries in town. I don’t know which one he picked.”

“I’ll ask,” Irons said. “Well, he’ll be in our jail awhile, at least until Ezra Brandon gets here in a week or two.” Brandon was the Justice of the Peace who rotated among assorted smaller towns in the local precinct of Yavapai County.

Hudson nodded. “And by then we should certainly know about poor Wilcox.”

“Yeah.”

“And then Billings’ likely fate.”

Irons nodded. “Yeah.”

Hudson asked, “In the meantime, what do I do with his things in his room? He obviously won’t be staying at the hotel anymore. I need the room for other

guests.”

Irons said, “Well, collect his stuff and keep ‘em at the hotel somewhere until we tell you where they should go.”

“Is that really the hotel’s responsibility?”

Irons smirked. “Well, I guess not, George. Okay, send ‘em to the marshal’s office. We’ll store ‘em there in an empty cell.”

“Very good, sir.”

“But before you gather ‘em up, I want to go through his room and his things. That’s why I stopped in. It doesn’t really matter, I suppose, but I’m curious about who he is and what he’s doin’ here. I want to know if there’s anythin’ more to this incident beyond a stupid drunken mistake.”

“Can I consider this official, marshal?”

“Official?”

“Hotel policy is not to let anybody into guests’ rooms except the guests. Not without the consent of the guests, that is.”

Irons nodded. “Oh, right. Yup, this is official marshal’s business.”

Hudson turned and picked a key off a hook on a board. He handed the key to Irons. “Room 209.”

“Thanks.” He took the key.

Irons leaned in closer. He spoke softly. “Um—George. That young woman in the dining room?”

Hudson leaned closer, too. He lowered his voice. “You mean the most beautiful young woman you have ever seen in my dining room or anywhere else in Madera Verde? Or maybe Arizona Territory? Why do you think I have been standing at this counter all the time, pretending I have work to do, but staring into the dining room?”

Irons smiled. He said, “Yeah, that one, George.”

“Her name is Ophelia Grayson. All the way from El Paso. Got here two days ago. On the stage.”

“Two days ago?” Irons repeated. “Huh. Funny I didn’t notice her before.”

Hudson said, “As far as I can tell, she has not left the hotel.”

“I see.” Irons savored the sound of her name. “Ophelia Grayson. I like that. Ophelia Grayson.”

Hudson raised a finger. “But, Marcus, she registered as *Mrs.* Mortimer Grayson.”

“Oh, damn,” Irons spit out. He followed a strict rule against chasing married women.

“Yeah,” Hudson said, sympathetically. “Damn is right.” He sighed. “Otherwise, I would have approached her myself.”

Irons nodded. Hudson wasn't much older than himself, and he wasn't married either.

"Ah, well." Irons looked back at Ophelia again. She was moving another forkful of hotcakes toward her open mouth. Irons pictured his own lips heading toward hers. He was starting to get an erection again. He shook his head slowly, just once.

Irons looked back at Hudson. "Yes, well, pity."

Hudson said, "Let me know if there's anything I can help you with in Mr. Billings' room."

"Sure," Irons said. He hefted the room key in his hand and headed for the stairs. He glanced into the dining room, but Ophelia was concentrating on scraping up some syrup from her plate. He shook his head again. "Whew," he said under his breath.

He found Room 209 easy enough. He unlocked the door and pushed it open. But he didn't step inside immediately. Always be careful, Marshal Irons. He looked between the doorjamb and the door. He saw nobody hiding behind the door.

The room looked like Billings had spent almost no time in it. The bed had not been used. Of course, not; he had spent the night in jail. There was a small valise on the bed along with saddlebags and a Winchester. The valise looked stuffed. But other than those items, nothing had been touched in the room that he could see.

Irons stepped into the room and closed the door. He checked the drawers in the chest by the window. All of them were empty.

He looked in a small closet. It, too, was empty except for half a dozen hangers. Billings had not unpacked anything.

He picked up the Winchester and moved the lever down a short way. He checked the chamber; it held a live round. He brought the lever back up and laid the weapon back down on the bed.

He opened the small valise and dumped its contents onto the bed. He spread the items out with his hand. Two pairs of socks, two shirts, drawers, pants, toothbrush, comb, shaving mug and brush, a razor, shaving soap, and boot polish. There was nothing in the valise that would have been considered odd for a traveler, especially for a man on horseback.

There was no money in the valise.

Irons stuffed everything back into the valise and closed it. Then he opened the straps on the saddlebags and dumped the contents onto the bed. He rummaged through them. Another shirt and some socks, a bandana, saddle soap, hoof pick, horse comb and brush, several pounds of grain, a few more sundry



items. Again, no money.

But there was a small notebook, about the size of his hand, rather worn and water stained. He sat down on the bed and opened the notebook and thumbed through the pages. Almost all of them were blank except for the first half dozen pages. Those pages contained lists that looked like Billings had been buying supplies and making notes about additional items to buy and chores that needed to be done. Foodstuffs, with quantities and cash paid for the items: canned goods, beef jerky, bacon, dried vegetables and fruit, hardtack crackers, cheeses, nuts, whiskey, tequila, and more. It was far more than one man would have needed for a long time. Irons thought it was interesting that the purchases included tequila in addition to whiskey.

Another page listed four mules Billings had purchased, with prices paid. As well as a horse and saddle and tack. Along with sacks of grain, four sawbuck pack saddles, panniers, a tent, cot, rope, canvas tarps, a few carpentry tools, a small medical kit, two axes, two hatchets, three pickaxes and six shovels.

Three pickaxes and six shovels? It was obvious Billings had been buying all this material for a *crew* of men.

He turned the page. "Ah." The next page contained four names with dollar amounts after three of the names:

Daniel Foster \$100  
William Schaefer \$100  
Red Cooper \$100  
Pedro Garcia

Irons wondered how many Pedro Garcias there were in Mexico and the American Southwest. Must have been hundreds. But a Mexican in the party probably explained the tequila in the supplies.

Subsequent pages were unused.

Irons closed the notebook and slapped it idly against the palm of his hand. It looked like these four men and Billings were going mining or prospecting. The quantities listed suggested they planned to be gone for a couple of weeks at least.

But prospecting for what? He knew of no active gold deposits anywhere near Madera Verde. Placer mining had died out quickly a dozen years ago. And where were these men and all these animals and supplies? Hudson had said Billings had arrived alone.

For that matter, Irons didn't think Billings looked like a miner or prospector.

Irons opened the notebook again. He flipped through the lists. Yes, as he remembered: no dates.

So, these notes could have been from years earlier. Maybe by someone besides Billings. The notebook itself was obviously old. Maybe the notebook was simply one he had found somewhere, and he planned to use the blank pages for his own purposes.

Maybe the notebook was significant, maybe it meant nothing. But it was curious. It was the only odd thing in all of Billings' belongings in the hotel room. Irons decided to take the notebook with him and show it to Marshal Lindahl. They would ask Billings about it, of course. But Irons didn't think Billings would be any more cooperative about the notebook than he had been about what he was doing in Madera Verde.

Irons jammed everything back into the saddlebags and redid the straps. He stood up. He scanned the room one more time, shrugged, and headed for the door.

He descended to the hotel lobby. He glanced into the dining room, but it was deserted. He was disappointed. Even catching a glimpse of Ophelia Grayson would have been stimulating.

He nodded to Hudson, who was standing idly behind the front desk and had looked up. "Thanks, George."

But Hudson motioned Irons to approach the desk. "Marcus."

Irons stopped and looked at Hudson. "Yeah?"

Hudson repeated his gesture, more emphatically. He looked both ways.

Irons thought Hudson was acting secretive, almost conspiratorially. He walked back to the desk. "What is it?" Irons asked.

Hudson leaned closer, smiled, and almost whispered. "Mrs. Grayson asked me questions about you."

Irons raised his eyebrows. "Really? That's interestin'." Just the thought that the attractive woman had taken notice of him was exciting. But the thought that the attractive woman was *married* was frustrating.

Hudson said, "Uh-huh."

Irons smiled. "You didn't tell her the truth about me though, did you?" he joked.

Hudson stood up straight. "Certainly not, sir," he said. "Hotel policy prohibits frightening the guests."

Irons laughed. "Okay, I deserved that. But she asked questions about me, huh?" He smiled. And shrugged. "Like what?"

"Her first question was how many men you had killed."

Irons was taken aback. "Whoa. Why would she want to know that?"

"I do not know, sir," Hudson said. "She simply said that a man who had been in the saloon last night said that Doris told Billings he would not have

been the first man you had killed.”

“Doris did say that. Did you tell Mrs. Grayson?”

“Yes, I told her about those you had killed that I knew about,” Hudson said.

“Hey, c’mon, George. That’s all there were.”

“I always thought so, but I wanted to be accurate. So I added that caveat.”

Irons rolled his eyes. “Okay. But did you tell her that they were all in the line of duty?”

“I was most emphatic on that point, Marcus.”

“Good. What else?”

“Well, she said you were obviously courageous.”

Irons raised his eyebrows. “Nice.”

Hudson said, “I agreed with her.”

Irons felt a little self-conscious. Now, he did consider himself a brave man, but it would be unseemly to declare that. So, he said, “Maybe I’m just foolish.”

Hudson shook his head. “No, no, you’re very careful. I think.”

“You think?”

“Well,” Hudson drawled, “she said that the man in the saloon last night told her—with obvious admiration—that you faced down a man who already had a gun in his hand. Is that being careful, Marcus?”

Irons shrugged. “He was drunk. I didn’t think he could move very fast. Even if he could keep a grip on his pistol. And I doubted he could’ve hit anything.”

“But you didn’t *know* that.”

“Well, okay. Point taken. But why would Mrs. Grayson mention that? It wasn’t a question.”

“Not sure, but that statement was just a preamble to her real question. Courageous, yes, but she wanted to know if you were honest, too? Trustworthy?”

“What the hell, George? What was she after? And why? What did you tell her?”

“I said I trusted you implicitly.”

“Thanks. Did she have other questions?”

“Next she asked if you had a curious nature.”

“A curious nature? What the hell did she even mean by that?”

“I don’t know.”

Irons chuckled. “A curious nature? Well, that’s a *curious* question.”

They both laughed.

Irons asked, “So, what did you tell her? Do you think I have a *curious nature*?”

“Well, I mentioned that you liked to read books on history and geology and biographies and material like that.”

Irons nodded. “Well, okay. Hardwick has quite a library and gets more books all the time. He’s got books on all kinds of subjects. That’s why he never has any money.”

“And you even read novels, too, Marcus.”

“Well, so do you,” Irons snapped. “Why were novels not considered respectable?”

“Well, sometimes,” Hudson said. “But I also mentioned to her how Marshal Lindahl complains—half-heartedly, to be sure—that you’re always going off on some wild goose chase or another.” He smiled.

Irons smirked. “I don’t think of ‘em as wild goose chases, George. In fact, some pan out just fine. What else did she ask about?”

“She wanted to know how much you were paid.”

Irons’ mouth dropped open. “Now why in the world would she want to know *that*?”

Hudson shrugged.

“You didn’t tell her, did you? You’re on the city council. You know what I’m paid.” Hudson was half-owner of the hotel, an important business in the town.

“I did tell her.”

“George, that was none of her business. Why did you tell her? It’s embarrassin’. Even cowhands make more than I do. And they don’t have to worry about gettin’ shot.”

“The city council has to stay within its budget, Marcus.”

“Well, budget more, dammit.”

“Marcus, I—”

“Oh, never mind, George. I just wish you’d been a little more—a little more—uh, discreet.”

“I am sorry, Marcus. But I would have told her anything she wanted to know about just about anything to keep her talking to me up close like that.”

Irons laughed and smiled. “Okay, well, that I get. Anyway, what else did she ask about?”

“That was it.”

“Well, those questions don’t make any sense.”

Hudson shrugged again. “Thought I’d mention it to you anyway.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Hotel policy is to keep the law informed.”

Irons smiled and nodded. “Right.” He gave the counter a tap and headed

for the door. "Later, George."

"Yes, sir."

Outside, Irons headed east. A block down he stopped at Doc Williams' office, which was part of the physician's home. The doctor was standing in an inner room next to a cot on which Sandy Wilcox was lying motionless. An attractive young nurse, the doctor's daughter, was boiling soiled bandages in a pot on a small stove in the front office.

"Hey, nice to see you, Marcus," the nurse said. She gave him a big smile.

Irons nodded, and he smiled, too. "Emily," he said. "Nice to see you, too."

They always said it was nice to see each other even if they had seen each other several times already that day. And Irons made it a point to see Emily regularly. Especially on those infrequent occasions when he got to see her naked. So "nice to see you" always had a prurient double meaning to it for both of them.

Irons wouldn't have resisted Emily's suggestions for more frequent private meetings if her hints about marriage weren't so obvious. Now, being married to Emily Williams was not an unpleasant thought to Irons, but being married—period—was.

She asked, "Come to check on Sandy?"

"Yeah," Irons said. "I take it he's still alive, or you would've said somethin' right away."

"He's still with us," Emily said. "Father is optimistic."

Irons nodded. "Good."

"Go on in."

"Thanks."

Irons joined the doctor in his inner office. "Doctor," he said.

"Marcus," Dr. Williams said.

"How is he?" Irons asked.

"Surprisingly good, for a man who's been shot in the gut. I loaded him up with laudanum to kill the pain. So he's been sleeping most of the time. I removed the bullets with little problem. Patched up the wounds properly. He seems stable. He might just make it."

"That's good to hear."

"I'm hopeful. Gut shots are so frequently fatal, but in this case the bullets missed vital organs. Amazing luck."

Irons nodded. "Yeah. Well, you'll let us know of any change in his condition, one way or the other?"

"Of course."

"Thanks."

*Rim Country*

Irons left the room. He tipped his hat to Emily and smiled, but he kept going toward the door. “Nice to see you, Emily.”

“Marcus,” Emily said, smiling. “Nice to see you.”

They both laughed.

## Chapter Three

When Irons got back to the marshal's office, he found Hardwick sitting in a chair in front of Marshal Samson Lindahl's desk. The newspaper man held a notepad in one hand. Lindahl was commenting on the attempts by the local cattlemen's association to squelch a rash of recent cattle rustling. Hardwick was scribbling in the notepad with a pencil.

Irons wandered to the side of the desk and sat down in another chair. He didn't want to interrupt Lindahl, for whom he had a lot of respect. Lindahl, a good deal older than Hardwick, had been a lawman most of his life. Not in Madera Verde, since the town had only existed for about a dozen years. Settlers had not started arriving in the whole Verde Valley until during the Civil War. But the town was growing rapidly.

Lindahl had been Madera Verde's first and only city marshal so far. And a very satisfied city council never suggested he retire. But it was clear Lindahl was warming to the idea, like it or not.

He had been wounded several times in gunfights, and his body had never healed properly from the wounds. His knees were painful; he avoided stairs or even walking too much. His hands were becoming crippled by arthritis, and cataracts were stealing his vision. Irons thought money was the biggest obstacle to Lindahl's retiring. Lindahl was a tough old buzzard, but we all grow old.

Lindahl paused in his comments to Hardwick and looked at Irons. "How's Wilcox?"

Irons said, "Still alive. Doc Williams thinks he has a good chance of survivin'."

Lindahl nodded, then shook his head. "Damn shame anyway. I hope he makes it."

Irons nodded. He held up the notebook he had brought from the hotel. "Found this in Billings' stuff in his room."

Lindahl held out his hand, and Irons got up and handed him the notebook. The marshal started thumbing through the pages. Irons sat back down.

Lindahl focused on the entries in the notebook. "Marcus, gimme a summary of what you found out about Billings at the hotel."

Irons told him what he had learned from Hudson and what his examination of Billings' hotel room had found.

Lindahl tossed the notebook on his desk. "I don't know how those lists relate to our Mr. Billings. Where are all those men named in that list? Where are the mules and the horse and all those supplies?"

Irons said, "I thought maybe the entries had been made by someone else, perhaps a long time ago. Maybe he's just usin' an old notebook he found."

Lindhahl nodded. "That makes sense. So, as far as we can tell, Cameron Billings is in town, by himself, for some reason of his own. He got drunk in the Mogollon last night and shot a man. A simple situation. Probably we didn't need to even look beyond that."

Irons thought, *But I got to see the beautiful Mrs. Mortimer Grayson.*

Hardwick said, "Even a cursory investigation can expose interesting or even unwelcome complications in what appears to be an innocuous scenario, Marshal Lindahl. Law enforcement and journalism are similar in that way. We both employ the same tools in seeking the truth."

Lindhahl said, "Uh-huh. Well, not that it matters in Mr. Billings' case. If Wilcox lives, Brandon will probably refer him to the Territorial Court in Prescott for charges on attempted murder." Lindahl looked at Irons. "You'd get a trip outa that, Marcus, haulin' his ass to Prescott. You do like to travel."

"I do," Irons said.

Lindhahl said, "And if Wilcox dies, maybe we'll just hang the son-of-a bitch right here."

Hardwick said, "Prescott won't like that."

"No, I suppose they wouldn't," Lindahl said. "They're fussy about protocol."

Hardwick said, "Though I could issue a special edition for a hanging. It's been several years since there's been a really noteworthy event in Madera Verde."

Irons chuckled. He said, "A hangin' would attract a crowd. Sell more papers, huh, Arch?" He smiled.

Hardwick smiled too. "I did have that thought, yes. Attract more advertisements, too. And it would prove an economic boon for the community."

Irons said, "The saloons would have a holiday." He smiled.

Hardwick nodded. "Indeed."

Lindhahl said, "I'd have to hire Doug Stevens for more crowd control. Maybe even have to ask Locke for the loan of a deputy sheriff or two." Gordon Locke was the sheriff of Yavapai County.

Hardwick added, "Why, I could host reporters from Phoenix, Flagstaff, Tucson. A most satisfying collaboration of esteemed professionals."

Lindhahl said, "Well, Arch, don't send out invitations yet."

Hardwick closed his eyes and nodded. "Of course, Marshal Lindahl. It is sinful—and premature—of me to relish the potential beneficial consequences of the possible unfortunate demise of Mr. Wilcox and the resultant lawful



retribution inflicted on Mr. Billings.”

The door to the office creaked open. Timidly, Ophelia Grayson stepped just inside and stopped. She peered around the edge of the door she was holding open. “May I come in? I don’t want to disturb you gentlemen.”

Irons gasped and leaped to his feet.

Hardwick fumbled his notebook as he struggled to his feet, the chair legs scraping annoyingly on the floorboards. He scooted over to stand next to Irons. He whipped off his glasses. His eyes wide, he mouthed to Irons, *Who is that?*

But Irons was too busy staring at Ophelia to respond.

Lindahl managed to get to his feet using both his hands on the desk to support himself. He winced as he straightened up. “Of course, miss,” he said. “Please come in.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said. She took another step inside and closed the door behind her. She looked ill at ease, glanced at all three men.

Irons noticed she was still wearing the same dress she had on in the hotel. But she had tucked her long blonde hair inside her bonnet. And she was clutching a small Bible in both gloved hands. A small, cloth, pouchlike purse dangled from her fingers. The purse sagged; it was holding something heavy.

But Irons was much closer to her than he had been in the hotel. The fair complexion of her face was even more enticing. He felt an erection rising. It made him squirm a little.

Lindahl motioned to the chair in front of his desk. “Please take a seat, miss.”

“Thank you, sir,” Ophelia walked demurely to the chair and slowly, gracefully settled into its seat.

Lindahl lowered himself slowly toward his own chair. He grunted as he descended and finally simply dropped in place with a wince.

Irons noticed the stricken look on Ophelia’s face.

She asked Lindahl, “Are you all right, sir?”

Lindahl leaned forward and folded his hands on the desktop. He smiled. “Yes, just gettin’ old, miss.”

Ophelia nodded slowly. “I understand.” She raised the small Bible in her hand. “I shall say a prayer for you this evening for the Good Lord to assuage the pain of the infirmities accompanying your advancing age.”

Lindahl blinked a couple of times. “Oh, uh, that would be kind of you, miss.”

She smiled. “My pleasure, sir. My Christian duty.”

Irons looked at Hardwick, who returned the look. *Christian duty? Who is this woman?*

Lindahl said, “Yes, well, what can I do for you, miss?”

Ophelia said, “Actually, sir, it’s missus. Mrs. Mortimer Grayson.”

“Oh, I see,” Lindahl said. “My apologies, Mrs. Grayson.”

She waved it off with a small, gloved hand. “It’s nothing, sir. In fact, since I am the supplicant in this, and I have heard what high regard the community has for you and your service, I would prefer that you simply call me Ophelia.”

Irons looked at Hardwick and mouthed, *Texas*. Her accent would have told him that even if he had not learned in the hotel that she had arrived from El Paso.

Hardwick nodded and mouthed back, *Texas*.

Lindahl nodded in appreciation of Ophelia’s compliment. He said, “As you wish—Ophelia. What brings you to my office?”

Ophelia glanced at Hardwick and then back at Lindahl. “Um, my concern is of a confidential nature, Marshal Lindahl.”

Lindahl nodded. “All right.”

“I have no objection to Deputy Marshal Irons being here. Indeed, he is the primary reason for my visit here.”

Lindahl said, “Really?” He gave Irons a severe what-have-you-been-up-to look.

Irons, his eyebrows raised, looked quickly at Hardwick. And then at Lindahl.

He shrugged. “Sam, I caught a glimpse of Mrs. Grayson in the hotel this morning. That’s all the contact I’ve had with this woman, I swear.” He gave a helpless gesture with his hands.

Ophelia said, “Oh, no, no, Marshal Lindahl. I have no *complaint* about Deputy Irons. Quite the contrary.”

Lindahl nodded. “I see. Good, glad to hear that.”

“But, marshal,” Ophelia said, “may I ask who the third gentleman is? I have no choice but to discuss my dilemma with you and Deputy Irons, but I do not wish a third party to hear what I have to relate.”

Lindahl said, “He’s Archibald Hardwick, the editor of the town newspaper.”

“Newspaper!” Ophelia blurted, though in a meek voice. She put a hand to her chest. “Oh, mercy, I especially would not want a *reporter* hearing my tale. I emphasize, sir, that I must have your assurance and that of Deputy Irons that this conversation will be in the strictest confidence. At least for a certain length of time.”

Lindahl said, “That’s usually the way we operate all the time anyway. But it depends on what you’re gonna tell us. Are you gonna confess to a murder or somethin’ like that?”

Ophelia smiled and even giggled. “Oh, mercy, no, sir. Nothing like that.”  
“Well, then?”

“I am not talking about anything criminal, I assure you,” Ophelia said. “And I would not even be here in your office if circumstances had not taken a most unfortunate turn overnight. But time is very important. I am desperate.”

Lindhahl folded his arms. He frowned. “You’re being pretty mysterious, ma’am. How about gettin’ to the point?”

“Would it be asking too much to have the third gentlemen exit the office for a few moments so we could converse?”

Hardwick jerked a thumb at the door between the two offices. “Marshal, I will retire to my office so Mrs. Grayson will feel more comfortable. I have an abundance of work to attend to.” He turned toward his office.

Lindhahl raised a hand. “Wait, Arch, wait.” Hardwick stopped.

The marshal looked at Ophelia again. “Ma’am, Mr. Hardwick is a valuable member of our community, and he and his newspaper are of particular use to me and our duties here. I can vouch for his integrity and his ability to keep a secret—temporarily, if secrecy is warranted. And pledged.”

“Ma’am,” Hardwick said. “My newspaper and my journalism both depend on my reputation for veracity and professionalism and, I emphasize, discretion. I guard that reputation with my life. If Marshal Lindhahl specifies confidentiality, no one will hear a word of it from me.”

Ophelia looked doubtful. “Sir, if my story were to appear in your newspaper tomorrow, it would be a disaster for me.”

The three men in the room chuckled.

Ophelia looked at the marshal. “I am missing something, sir?”

Hardwick said, “My newspaper is a nominal weekly, but frankly I rarely have enough material—or advertising—to publish an edition more than once every two to three weeks.”

Irons said, “And he just published one this past Saturday.”

Hardwick said, “So it will probably be at least two weeks before I could publish anything about your story in my newspaper anyway. Assuming I wanted to publish anything about it at all.”

“Ah,” Ophelia said. “Well, as for that, I think you will find my story quite newsworthy. I doubt you would be able to resist relating my story to your reading public.”

“Really? Well, you do intrigue me, Mrs. Grayson,” Hardwick said.

Irons said, “Me, too, Mrs. Grayson.” And in his mind, he reviewed all the questions she had asked Hudson about him. What was she up to? It was all most curious.

Ophelia fidgeted with the Bible in her lap. "All right then." She looked at Hardwick. "Sir, sometimes newspapers will agree to delay publication of a story for a time for sufficient cause. In exchange for eventual full disclosure, with complete and honest interviews, would you agree to delay publication of my story for, say, at least two weeks?"

Hardwick nodded. "I agree to your terms, Mrs. Grayson. I can promise you at least temporary confidentiality. My newspaper will be silent for at least two weeks."

Irons said, "In more ways than one." He smiled at Hardwick.

Hardwick said, "Elaboration was unnecessary, Marcus."

"Sorry." But Irons smiled again.

Ophelia looked at Lindahl. "I am ready to tell my story, Marshal Lindahl."

Lindahl spread his hands toward Ophelia. "Proceed, ma'am."

Ophelia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Sir, have you ever heard of the Knights of the Golden Circle? Associated with the late War Between the States?"

Lindahl considered that for a moment. "I can't say that I have."

Ophelia looked at Irons and Hardwick. "Have you, sirs?"

Irons shook his head. "No."

Hardwick said, "Of course I have."

Irons laughed. "Naturally."

Hardwick said, "It was founded by a Mr. George Bickley well before the Civil War as a secret organization to promote the formation of a new country called the Golden Circle, by means of filibustering. The new country would be a slaveholding, agrarian empire."

Irons asked, "What's filibusterin', Arch?"

Hardwick said, "Private military expeditions into weak foreign countries to seize control of the government. Most notorious example of such an endeavor was that of William Walker in 1854. He managed to use a small mercenary force to take advantage of a civil war in Nicaragua. Made himself president of the country."

Irons said, "Huh. Never heard of him. What happened to him?"

"Costa Rica's army kicked him out of Nicaragua in 1857. Eventually he was executed by the Honduran government in 1860."

Irons said, "He should've stayed home."

"Indeed."

Lindahl asked, "So where was this Golden Circle country going to be?"

Hardwick said, "It would include the slaveholding states of the South, plus Mexico, Central America, parts of northern South America, Cuba, and the other

islands of the Caribbean. A circle, you see. The capital would be in Cuba.”

Irons whistled. “Ambitious.”

Ophelia interjected, “You certainly know your history, Mr. Hardwick.”

Hardwick smiled and bowed. “Thank you, Mrs. Grayson.”

Ophelia said, “But the goals of the Knights changed as the Southern states moved closer to secession.”

“Yes, Mrs. Grayson,” Hardwick said. “The Knights then focused on raising money, arms, and men, essentially a private army, to support secession efforts. And once the war started in April of 1861, most of their members joined the Confederate Army and were no longer active in the organization. The Knights played a much less visible role after that. It was a secret society, after all.”

Ophelia said, “But an effective, well-organized secret society, Mr. Hardwick.”

“Fair enough,” Hardwick conceded. “They were organized into local “castles” and had levels of membership with secret passwords, codes, insignia, handshakes, and so forth. All secret societies adore such protocol. In fact, it is assumed that many Knights were also Freemasons. Bickley himself may have been a Freemason. Freemasons are notorious for their secretiveness. And if he wasn’t a Freemason, he was certainly familiar with their secretive practices. Perhaps you are familiar with the insignia of the Freemasons, Mrs. Grayson? A drawing compass above a carpenter’s square?”

Ophelia said, “Yes, I am familiar with that representation. But, Mr. Hardwick, even though the Knights did become less visible during the war, they didn’t disappear.”

“No,” Hardwick said. “They continued to raise money for the Confederacy, of course, and carried out small subversive operations in the North.”

Irons said, “This is very interestin’.” And he meant it. “I don’t remember hearin’ durin’ the war about these Knights of the Golden Circle. But I was only eight years old when the war started.”

The other three people laughed.

Ophelia said, “So, Mr. Irons, you didn’t serve in the army in the war.”

Irons smiled. “No, ma’am. Way too young. But my father did though. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin.”

“And you gentlemen?” she asked.

Hardwick said, “I served in a Pennsylvania regiment.”

Lindahl said, “Army of Northern Virginia.”

With that information there was a pause in the conversation. Finally, Irons said, “So, Arch, the Knights must have disappeared after the war.”

Hardwick shrugged. “No point to the organization anymore. Likely

withered away to nothing or some approximation of it.”

Ophelia looked at Hardwick. “Ah, Mr. Hardwick, you are mistaken about the demise of the Knights after the war.” She was smiling.

Hardwick studied her. “You have the look of the Cheshire Cat upon you, Mrs. Grayson. I would grant some Knights may still exist. There are rumors I have always considered fanciful that at the end of the war, large caches of gold were secreted away for use during a preposterous second civil war. You wish to comment?”

“The rumors are not fanciful, Mr. Hardwick. Gold *has* been buried all over the South and Southwest for eventual use in a second war to dismember the Union. Many Southern people still believe fervently in a future Golden Circle nation. And each deposit is watched over by a sentinel, a true believer, a man who has sworn to guard the treasure with his life.”

Hardwick asked, carefully, “Are you such a believer in the Golden Circle, Mrs. Grayson?”

She said, “No. To use your phrase, I believe dreams of an eventual Golden Circle country are fanciful. It will never happen.”

Irons said, “But you do believe there is gold buried all over the South and Southwest.”

“There is no doubt about that, Deputy Irons,” she said. “In fact, I know a sentinel Knight of the Golden Circle.”

Hardwick raised his eyebrows. “Remarkable. Fascinating, in fact.”

Irons said, “Something for your newspaper, Arch?”

“No doubt,” Hardwick said.

Lindhahl sat up straight in his chair. “So there really is gold buried all over the place? Just waitin’ to be found by somebody?”

Ophelia said, “At the risk of their lives, sir. The sentinels will kill anybody who tries to steal the gold.”

Irons said, “The war ended, like 14 years ago. Some of these sentinels may have died since then.”

Ophelia nodded. “Quite possibly.”

Lindhahl said, wistfully, “Buried treasure. Just waitin’ to be found. And nobody guardin’ it.”

Irons thought Lindhahl was having visions of a comfortable retirement.

He looked at Hardwick. “Who would own the gold anybody dug up?”

“I believe that falls under the Old Roman law of finders, keepers.”

The others smiled.

“Well put, sir,” Ophelia said.

Lindhahl leaned forward on his desk. He squinted at the young woman.

“Mrs. Grayson, are you tellin’ us you know where the gold this particular Knight sentinel friend of yours is guardin’ is buried?” He just couldn’t handle calling Ophelia by her first name.

Both Irons and Hardwick took a half-step closer.

She said, “No.”

“Oh,” Lindahl said, and he leaned back in his chair.

Ophelia raised a finger. “But,” she said. “Mr. Hardwick mentioned that the Knights raised money during the war to support the Confederacy.”

Hardwick said, “That was their chief activity once most of their members joined the Confederate Army.”

“A considerable sum of money was raised in California to help the South,” she said.

Irons said, “But California was never a slave state.”

Hardwick countered, “Not officially, but they had slaves nonetheless.”

Ophelia said, “And slaveholders and others who supported the South.”

“So?” Irons asked.

“Well, in the middle of 1862 the Knights in California realized the state would never turn slave and join the Confederacy. So, they collected all the funds they had been raising, converted all of it into convenient gold coins, and tried to transport it to Texas, where it could be of more benefit to the Confederacy.”

Irons said, “Tried to?”

Hardwick raised his hands and interrupted. “Oh, oh, I’ve heard this legend. The party transporting the gold to Texas got ambushed by Apaches in Arizona Territory. Well, it was still part of New Mexico Territory back then. So, they buried the gold during the attack and planned to come back later to retrieve it, if any of them survived.”

Ophelia was nodding. “Yes, exactly.”

“Really?” Irons said. “Buckets of gold coins buried somewhere in Arizona Territory?”

Lindahl repeated, “In Arizona Territory. Somewhere in Arizona Territory. Maybe nearby.” He looked to the side. “Maybe nearby,” he repeated quietly.

Hardwick stuck his hands in his pockets. “But the legend suggests that nobody in the ambushed party survived. Or if they did survive the confrontation with the Indians, they joined the Confederate Army and were all killed in the war. So nobody knows where the gold is buried. Nobody knows where to look.”

Lindahl sounded dejected. He said, “And if somebody merely stumbled on the buried gold, he sure as hell—excuse me, Mrs. Grayson—wouldn’t announce it to anybody. Nah, Mrs. Grayson. This story is just bull—er,

nonsense.”

Hardwick said, “The treasure—if it ever did exist—is gone, either because its location is undiscoverable, or the gold was already found long ago. Either way, in effect, the treasure does not exist.”

Ophelia said, “Oh, I assure you the treasure does exist. And given where it was buried, finding it by accident would be impossible. But by a seeming miracle, one man *did* survive the Indian attack. And he *did* survive the war. And he *does* know where the gold is buried.”

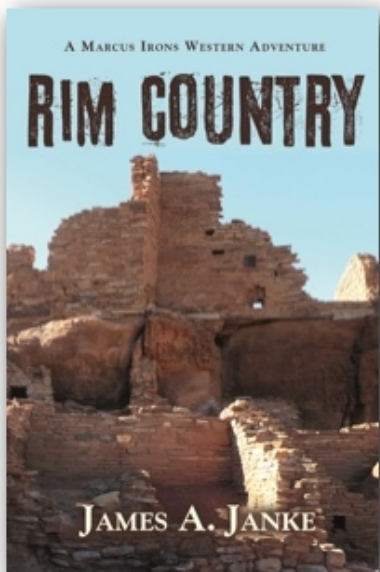
The three men stared at Ophelia. Lindahl sat up straight. Irons drew in a long breath. Hardwick took his hands out of his pockets.

Hardwick asked, slowly, “And do you know who this miraculous survivor is?”

Ophelia paused and then announced, “Mortimer Grayson.”

Irons blurted, “Damn!”





*In 1879 in Arizona Territory beautiful Ophelia Grayson hires deputy marshal Marcus Irons to hunt for gold treasure buried during the Civil War in the ruins of an ancient pueblo. But finding the gold will be difficult. So will surviving!*

## **Rim Country**

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