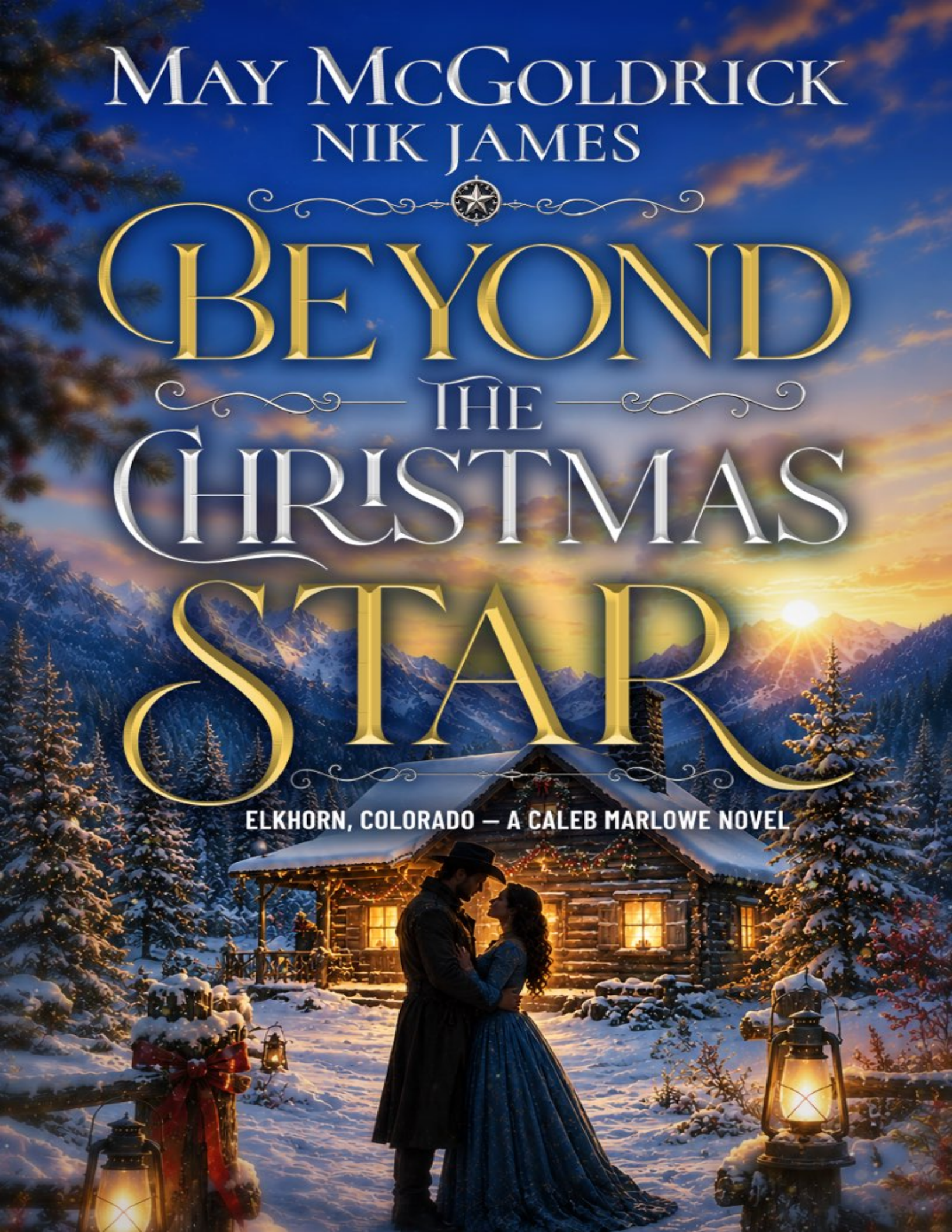


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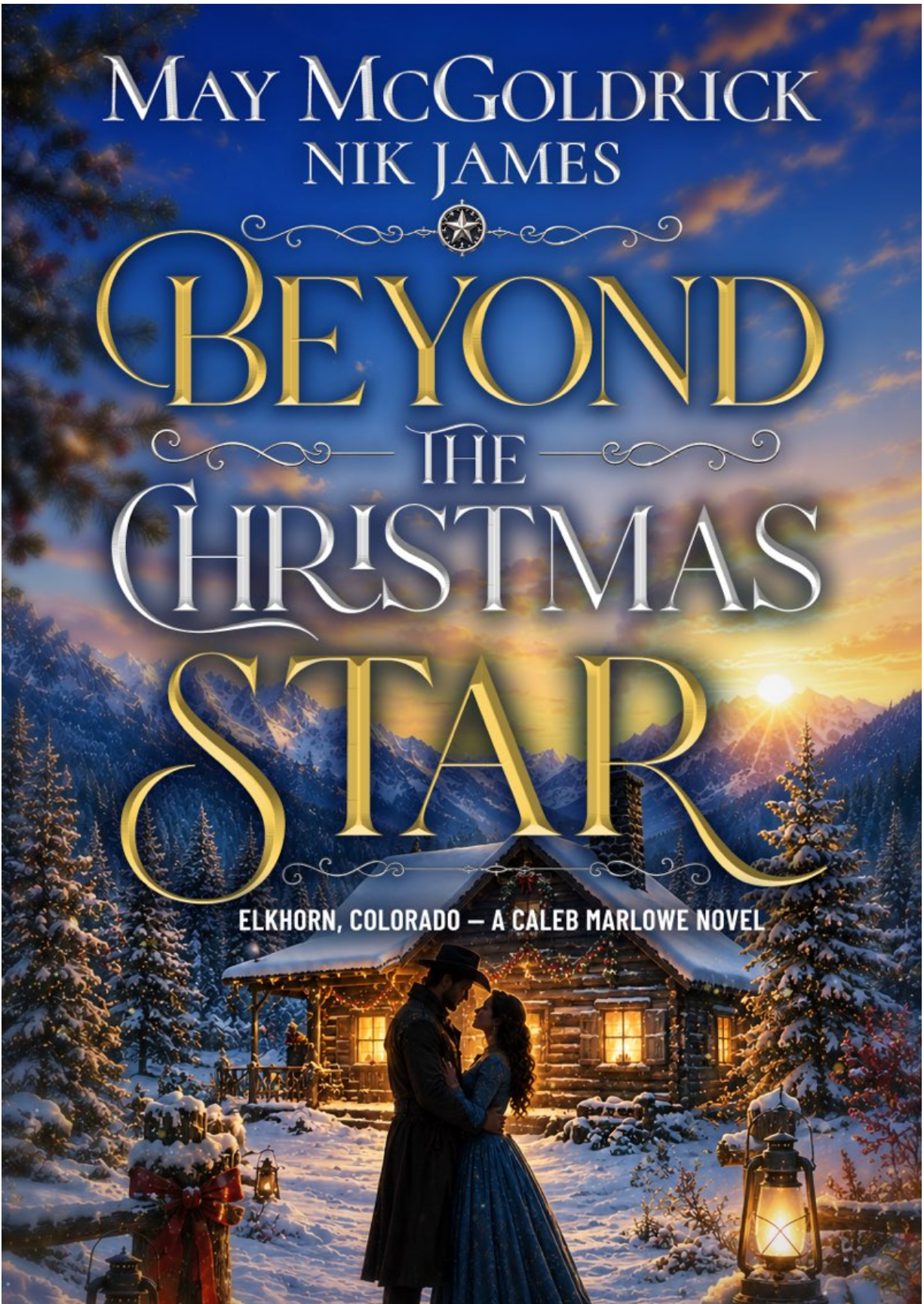
ELKHORN, COLORADO — A CALEB MARLOWE NOVEL



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Chapter One



Elkhorn, Colorado
September 1878

THE HACKLES ROSE on Caleb Marlowe's neck and a chill prickled his scalp. In his fist the hammer hung poised, ready to strike home the nail. He rolled his broad shoulders and raised his eyes from the barn roof he was about a day from finishing.

This was the way with him. Caleb sensed trouble before it barreled through the door. The instinct had kept him alive more times than he could count.

Near the edge of the rise where the ranch buildings were taking shape, Bear was on his feet and looking to the southeast. The large yellow dog had smelled something on the crisp, mid-morning breeze.

The speck of a distant rider appeared at the crest of a far-off hill and then disappeared. A moment later, he came into view again. He was coming hard.

Caleb knew instantly who it was. He'd know Henry Jordan in a dust storm a mile away. His partner had gone

off this morning to round up two stray steers that had wandered downriver. And the only time he'd ever seen Henry push a horse this hard, the fellow had a Cheyenne war party pounding along behind him.

Caleb stared out beyond the approaching rider, but he could see no one on his tail.

Henry was one of those people who trouble trailed after like a hungry wolf. He didn't have to go out looking for it. He'd just turn around, and there it was. Once that happened, Henry's fierce temper blazed to the surface, and the customary good nature went up in smoke as quick as dry prairie grass in a lightning storm. He was strong and fast and deadly as a rattler once he got started. All kinds of mayhem generally broke out then.

Surprisingly, nobody died in the fight he'd won in a saloon in Denver this past winter, but the damn thing had cost him six months in jail. And Caleb had to deal with the devil himself to get Henry out.

He glanced over at the bucket holding his gun belt and twin Colt Frontiers. Laying down his hammer, Caleb worked his way over. Keeping his eyes on the far end of the valley—as far as he could see, anyway—he strapped on his guns and started for the ladder.

He'd promised Sheila he'd try to stay out of trouble.

Granted, she had delivered that instruction with her chin lifted and those blue eyes fixed on him as if she expected obedience. Keeping a straight face, he'd pointed out that trouble generally arrived without asking permission first. She'd informed him that was a poor excuse.

Looking at Henry now, riding as though the world were ending, Caleb suspected he was about to disappoint her again.

There was also the matter that disappointing Sheila Burnett had become increasingly unpleasant for Caleb. The doctor's daughter had come west from New York with city manners, a sharp mind, and absolutely no talent for minding her own business when people needed help. She was stubborn enough to argue with judges, brave enough to stand up to killers, and compassionate enough to see good in men who sometimes doubted it existed in themselves.

Somewhere along the way, she'd become the person Caleb most looked forward to seeing whenever she headed to Elkhorn.

Whatever was bringing Henry back without those steers, he had a good idea the roof was going to have to wait.

Caleb picked up his Winchester '73 from against the barn wall and stalked over toward the corral. As he reached the gate, Henry roared in like an Express rider bringing bad news from the battlefield.

"We got trouble, partner," he shouted breathlessly as he reined in. Henry pointed at the line of forested bluffs that formed the eastern border of their property. "Up there near the waterfall."

"What kind of trouble?"

"There's fellas up there working our land." He pulled his black, wide-brimmed hat off and ran a hand through the long brown hair that hung nearly to his shoulders. "At least, I think it's our land."

"This side of the ridge?"

Henry nodded.

"It's our land." Caleb peered at the black cattle grazing along the river in the valley below them. "You think they're after the herd?"

"They're prospecting."

Even after months of trying to carve a ranch out of this valley, Caleb had not quite settled into the idea that owning a piece of God's country meant you had to protect it. But he was learning. A while back, when six rustlers decided that they could just take his cattle, he'd suggested otherwise. That little incident didn't turn out quite the way those boys reckoned. They were now residing on Elkhorn's Boot Hill.

And every time he rode into town since then, Sheila looked at him with that mixture of worry and exasperation that somehow made him feel worse than any bullet wound.

"On our land?"

"How many times I got to say it, Marlowe?"

As Caleb considered it, he knew that the last thing they wanted was to have prospectors find anything out here. When they discovered gold on Sutter's land in California, the poor bastard lost everything. Trying to keep 49ers off his land was like trying to keep fleas off an old dog.

"How many?"

"Four that I saw."

"Recognize any of 'em?"

"Nope."

"Talk to 'em?"

Henry shook his head. "I was thinking about running 'em off. But then I recalled what you been saying about me

staying clear of law problems. So I came back for you.”

“Well, that was damn thoughtful, partner.” Caleb pulled his saddle off the fence and swung it up onto Pirate’s back. The buckskin had been watching and listening, and Caleb was certain he already knew they were heading out. “Glad you were able to keep in mind that this ranch will require the both of us.”

CALEB AND HENRY RODE south across the grass-covered valley for over an hour, then turned east and moved up into forested foothills. Ahead of them, the long, rugged ridge rose above the tall pines, forming the boundary between the ranch and land belonging to Frank Stubbs, their neighbor.

Beyond the ridgeline, the Stubbs claim consisted of large areas of forest and open range, but their neighbor was only interested in the precious minerals that could be carved from the earth. Caleb had already had a few brushes with Frank Stubbs, and he knew him to be a tough, grasping, miserable bastard—a hard drinker with a penchant for bullying. The property border was clear, however, and good ridgelines made good neighbors. More or less.

When the two partners reached a ravine that led roughly southwest, they followed a creek that twisted and tumbled toward the valley lowland.

Caleb’s plan was to approach the trespassers from above.

He knew the terrain. He'd been hunting here since he'd picked up the papers at the land office in Elkhorn back in January. He knew where the groves of cottonwood and aspen had fought to establish their space amongst the pines and other evergreens. He knew every ravine and wash and gulley, every mountain spring and creek. The ponds and small lakes formed by the lay of the land and the industry of beavers. The rocky bluffs and ledges where cougar and bear found shelter. The grassy meadows dotted with wildflowers in spring, now yellow as autumn encroached. Soon, it would all be covered by the deep snows of the long mountain winter.

And, for the first time in his life, Caleb found himself looking forward to winter.

Not the snow. Not the cold. He'd had enough of both to last three lifetimes. It was everything else.

The ranch house and barn would finally be finished. Cattle safely sheltered. Long evenings by the fire. Christmas coming to Elkhorn.

And Sheila.

The thought of her appeared with surprising ease these days. She had a way of doing that to a man. One minute he was thinking about fencing and cattle and whether the roof would be finished before the first snows fell. The next, he was wondering whether she'd be riding out this afternoon or what she'd think of the new barn.

He wasn't entirely comfortable with how often it happened.

"We're getting close," Henry told him when they reined in at the edge of the creek. The stream here was wide and

shallow, with round, gleaming stones protruding from the surface of the rippling water. "I saw 'em where the gulley broadens out by the pond just before it drops over the waterfall."

Caleb nodded. Sure as hell, these fellas had to be panning for gold. Not three miles north of their ranch, miners were busily digging silver out of the hills that ringed Elkhorn, but he'd heard some talk of gold occasionally showing up as well.

He looked back at the ridge and then gestured downward at the muddy edge of the creek. Hoof prints.

"Guess those would be our boys," Henry said.

"Yep. From the looks of things, these fellas came down onto our land from the ridge."

"From Frank Stubbs's land."

"These are fortunate men. If Stubbs spotted these knotheds on his side, he'd already have their carcasses nailed to his barn door."

Henry grinned. "If'n you ever finish that barn, we'd have a door to nail 'em up on."

Giving him a look, Caleb nudged his buckskin forward. But they hadn't even crossed the stream when two gunshots rang out.

Immediately, Henry had his rifle out of its scabbard and looked around.

"A revolver. A quarter mile that way," Caleb said.

"Maybe our trespassers decided to shoot one another. That'd save us some work."

"Too much to hope for."

The two men dismounted on the other side of the creek, tied their animals, and approached on foot.

The forest floor was a carpet of pine needles, and they moved through the forest silently. The land began to drop off, and it wasn't long before the sound of voices reached them, along with the smells of a dying campfire and burnt coffee.

When they reached a ridge at the top of the wide gulley, Caleb signaled to his partner. They moved past a grove of cottonwood trees until they reached a small rise that afforded a good view. They were eighty yards from the edge of a wide pond below. In front of them the terrain dropped off steeply. The sun was still high overhead. Between their vantage point and the creek, the grassy hillside was dotted with boulders and brush.

Lying on their bellies, they peered down into the gulley.

Below them, in a clearing on the near side of the wide creek, a slovenly camp had been thrown together. A few tarps had been hung over lines stretched between yellow-leaved cottonwood trees. Saddles and bed rolls lay beneath them. Smoke from a smoldering fire hung like a cloud over the camp.

Henry nudged him and held up four fingers. Caleb nodded.

Three tough-looking fellows were working with pans in the shallows. Shovels were stuck into the gravel at the edge of the pond. The fourth, stripped down to his breeches but wearing a pair of Remington six-shooters strapped to his hips, was busily starting to butcher one of his and Henry's stray steers by the edge of the camp. It must have

been the steer that took the two slugs they heard being fired.

"Not too neighborly," Caleb said under his breath.

Saddlebags and gear lay in heaps by the fire, and Caleb spotted a pair of Winchester '73s, a Henry Yellow Boy, and a seven-shot Spencer carbine. Two more braces of Remingtons and a pair of short-barreled Colts lay in bundled coils close to the shoreline. In a wide grassy spot just to the south of the camp, four horses were grazing contentedly by as many saddles. Good horses, from the look of them.

Caleb only needed a glance to know these fellas were not typical prospectors. The pans and shovels they were using were still shiny, undented, and new. These chuckleheads weren't greenhorns, though. In fact, from the shooting irons they were packing, he'd bet his last dollar they were road agents laying low and hoping to strike it rich while they were doing it. Their one mistake was trying to do it on his and Henry's land.

And Caleb had every intention of explaining that fact politely.

After all, Sheila was forever reminding him that not every disagreement needed to end in a gunfight.

He'd promised to make an effort.

At the moment, he was planning very hard to be reasonable with these knothheads.

One of them, big and burly and filthy as a hog, stood up, stretched his back, and threw his pan on the bank with disgust, cursing and eying his partners with disdain.

"Damn me but if that one ain't trouble," Henry whispered.

"They all are."

"Let's see if we can settle this without nobody getting buried," Caleb murmured.

"That a new philosophy?" Henry asked.

"Maybe."

Henry snorted. "Got a name for it?"

Caleb ignored him. That was answer enough.

The big man's wide-brimmed hat was battered and had an ornate, beaded band at the base of the crown. He took it off and squinted at the sun. In spite of the cool bite to the air, sweat glistened off his not-so-recently shaved scalp. Stomping out of the shallows, he threw himself down in the gravel next to the Colts, propping himself up on one elbow.

The other two in the water noticed him and straightened up.

"You lazy shit, Dog," one of them scoffed. He was the shortest of the bunch, stocky and grizzled-looking with a ratty wisp of beard. "Not even one full day we been at this, and you're already quitting."

"Weren't this *your* idea?" the other huffed. He was tall and lanky, and his moustache drooped over this mouth, rendering his lips practically invisible.

"That's right," Rat Beard grouched. "If you ain't kilt that lawman up north, we wouldn't even be here in Colorado."

Henry and Caleb exchanged a look.

Dog drew one of the short-barreled Colts from its holster and sat up, cocking the hammer and pointing it first at one of his partners and then at the other. The two men

stiffened, edging backward into deeper water, and Caleb saw the fellow butchering the steer had moved one hand cautiously to the grip of his Remington revolver.

Dog's Colt barked twice, and water splashed up between the men, who dove to the side, away from the line of fire. The gunhawk guffawed and slid the Colt back into its holster.

The men came to their feet, soaked through, cursing under their breaths, and sending evil looks at the shooter.

"Whadja do that fer?" Moustache shouted angrily, wiping water from his long, thin face.

"Reckoned you needed a bath," Dog sneered.

"You had no call fer drawing on us."

Dog stood, strapping on his gun belt, silencing the men. "Who's the chief of this here outfit, Humboldt?"

The gaunt-faced man stared a moment, then averted his eyes. "You, Mad Dog."

"That's right." Dog swiveled his gaze to the stocky little man. "Unless you think you're boss man, Rivers."

Henry had edged away to his right, where a tuft of grass made a good rest for the muzzle of his rifle. He knew how to position himself for a fight. The cottonwoods and pine and a jumbled stack of boulders behind them offered added protection.

Rivers shook his head.

"That's right," Dog crowed. "Then, do you no-account shit-for-brains got anything else you wanna say?"

The men stood still as rocks, and Caleb could practically see their frustrated anger—and fear—rippling across the surface of the water.

After a moment, the one called Rivers found his tongue, grumbling, "Just meant that this'll be easier once we get a long-tom set up, so's we can sluice this gravel."

"If you know so damn much about prospecting, you little shit, how come you ain't rich already?"

"Knowing how to do it ain't the same as being lucky."

"Well, you better hope your luck overall ain't running out."

Rivers scowled but said nothing. As he retrieved his pan from the shallows, Caleb saw him glance up at his gun belt a few feet away.

If that fella's fool enough to go for his gun, Caleb thought, he's a dead man.

Mad Dog saw the look too. "Two things, John Rivers. One, anytime you think you can take me, you'd best remember I can outdraw you any day of the week. And two, I got eyes in the back of my head, so if you think you can plug me in the back, think again."

The names suddenly rang a bell. Caleb knew them. John Rivers. Gustav Humboldt. And Mad Dog McCord. That would make the fellow butchering his steer either Lenny Smith or Slim Basher.

He'd heard of them when he was wearing a tin star up north. That was over two years ago. He'd found himself roped into serving as a lawman in Greeley after making a name for himself scouting and hunting with Old Jake Bell and leading folks across the western frontier from the Bighorn Mountains to the Calabasas. This gang never ventured into his town, though. And after the army conscripted him to work for them as a scout for a year, he

didn't figure he'd ever cross gun barrels with the likes of Mad Dog and Rivers.

They were tough hombres. They'd made a name for themselves hitting rail depots, Wells Fargo stagecoaches, and the occasional solitary homesteader wagon making its way through the Black Hills of Wyoming. Stone-cold killers, every one of them.

Caleb nudged his partner, whispering, "Stay here. Watch the butcher, in particular."

"And let's see if we can get through this without filling Boot Hill," Caleb added.

Henry quirked a crooked grin at him. "You been spending too much time with Miss Burnett, partner."

"Just watch the butcher."

Henry nodded, eased back the hammer on his Winchester, and swiveled the barrel of the rifle in that direction. Caleb saw he'd have a clear shot.

Below them, closer to the creek, a pair of cottonwoods cast their shade over the trunk of a fallen tree. Caleb decided that was as good a place as any to call out to these blackguards. He could use the fallen trunk for cover if he needed it.

Getting there unseen would take some doing, though. The steep grassy slope was mostly wide open, though it was dotted with boulders and clumps of scrub pine. In addition to the cottonwoods, several groves of aspen had established themselves on the hillside, though they were farther from the creek.

Leaving Henry, Caleb backtracked along the ridge. When he reached one of the aspen groves, he moved

stealthily down the hill to the cottonwoods.

When he'd tossed that tin badge on the table in Greeley, Caleb had promised himself he was finished chasing outlaws. He wanted land beneath his boots, cattle in his pastures, and a future that didn't begin and end with the draw of a gun.

More recently, he'd started imagining other things too. A warm house through the winter. Laughter around a supper table. Sheila sitting across from him, arguing about something she'd decided he was wrong about.

It was a dangerous habit, imagining a future.

A man could lose it in a heartbeat.

Right now, Caleb was not looking to shed blood. He just wanted these villains off his land.

As he reached the fallen cottonwood, he scanned the scene below him. The butcher had gone back to his work, and the two working the shallows had come up by the shore to shovel more gravel into their pans.

The sun was slightly behind Caleb, and he took up his position in the shade beneath the spreading branches of the cottonwoods. The outlaws were in full sun, a good forty yards from him. Only the butcher had any chance of getting to the cover of the trees, but Henry would take care of him. Considering they'd only have their pistols, these boys would need to get off a good shot even to wing him. They'd never come close. Not with him and Henry raining lead down from the hill.

Caleb unhooked the thongs over the hammers of his Colts. Cocking his Winchester, he raised the rifle nearly to his shoulder.

"Listen up, you fellas," he called out sharply. "And keep your paws clear of them irons."

Four surprised sets of eyes swung toward him.

"No need to get riled. But you're gonna pack your things and clear out. Got me?"

Mad Dog's hand drifted toward a short-barreled Colt, and the movement was not lost on Caleb. His Winchester barked and the slug buried itself in the gravel two feet in front of McCord, spraying stones and sand at the big man, who flinched and raised his hands. The sound of the shot echoed off the woods and along the valley, louder and more authoritative than the pistol shots that had alerted Caleb and Henry earlier.

Caleb swiveled his rifle toward the butcher, who stood with his hands raised, a bloody knife in one of them. There appeared to be no interest in getting into it from that quarter. He swung the barrel back to the others.

"What do you want?" Mad Dog growled.

"A peaceful afternoon," Caleb said dryly. "But looks like we're all fixing to be disappointed."

"We ain't making no trouble here."

"That depends on what you call trouble. You're prospecting on my land and fixing to eat one of my steers. That sounds like trouble to me."

"That all?" The outlaw visibly relaxed, lowering his hands a little. "Well, hell, we're sure sorry about that. Ain't we, boys?"

"We sure are, mister," John Rivers agreed, jerking his bearded chin toward the butcher, who was nodding

adamantly. "We found that steer a-wandering. It's an honest mistake, friend."

Mistake. Caleb eyed them coolly. He knew these four would happily put a bullet or two in him, mistake or no.

"Well, then, you can just leave that critter where he lies, put your gear on them horses, and get moving. Now."

"That ain't too Christian, fella," Mad Dog said, lowering his hands a little more. "We only reckoned we'd—"

"Don't test me, pilgrim," Caleb replied. "Or you'll be explaining to your Maker how Christian a fella *you* been. Now get moving."

The two outlaws behind him were edging closer to their gun belts. Caleb felt his hackles rising again. Some boys absolutely didn't know when to fold their hand and walk away.

"How about if'n we pay you for that meat?" Mad Dog suggested with all the charm of a fat mealy worm. "And the use of your creek here for a few days? A week or so, at most. We ain't fixing to be bad neighbors."

He shook his head. "No deal. You got nothing I want. Now, get moving or the wolves will be dining on your mangy carcasses tonight."

Mad Dog's eyes narrowed and his face darkened. Caleb could see he was calculating whether he could muster enough accuracy with those short-barreled Colts to drop him at this distance.

Before the killer could decide whether to throw down or live to fight another day, the bark on the cottonwood trunk exploded next to Caleb's head, showering him with splintered wood.

Chapter Two



CALEB SPUN AND CROUCHED DOWN, peering up the hill into the deep shadows of the trees. He spotted the puff of smoke in the golden-leafed aspens he'd passed as another crack of a rifle shot came with a brush of air against his ear and the *thup* sound that told him it was another near miss.

"There you are," he muttered. He chided himself for letting this knothead get the drop on him. Five of them rode together two years ago. He should have guessed there'd be one more in the area.

The sonovabitch was standing in the aspens about seventy yards up the hill, his rifle propped in the crook of a tree. From where the outlaw had positioned himself, Caleb figured he couldn't see Henry.

Another shot whizzed past Caleb's head. This one from the creek behind him. The butcher managed one more before Henry's bullet dropped him across the carcass of the dead steer.

The other three were not standing idle either. Humboldt and Rivers had both reached their guns, and Mad Dog was

running for the horses. The big man snatched up a saddlebag as he ran and continued to fire wildly up the hill.

A bullet cut a groove across the shoulder of Caleb's leather vest, three inches from his throat. Humboldt. The gaunt-faced outlaw was moving straight at him, his Remingtons spitting fire.

Caleb knew if he swiveled his Winchester around, the gunman on the hill would plug him for sure. After all, he presented a sizeable target at a few inches over six feet.

Drawing his Colt from its holster, Caleb made a half turn of his body and fired over his shoulder.

Humboldt staggered as the bullet struck him in the chest. For a moment he seemed more surprised than hurt. Then he lifted his pistol again. Caleb had no choice. His second shot dropped the outlaw before he could fire. Humboldt crumpled into the grass and did not move again.

The sound of hoofbeats reached him. Glancing toward the south end of the clearing, Caleb caught a glimpse of Mad Dog McCord bareback on one of the horses and hightailing it, leaving his partners to fend for themselves. So much for 'honor amongst thieves'.

"Guess that don't apply to killers," he muttered wryly.

The thought flashed through his mind that Sheila would probably have a few things say about this situation.

Provided he lived long enough to hear it.

That seemed like a worthwhile goal.

Two left. One in the aspens above him. Twenty yards to the left of Humboldt's body, Rivers was going after Henry, weaving his way across the open ground, his short legs pumping hard as he cut sharply back and forth.

About the Author

USA Today Bestselling Authors Nikoo and Jim McGoldrick have crafted over sixty fast-paced, conflict-filled historical and contemporary novels, along with two works of nonfiction, under the pseudonyms May McGoldrick, Jan Coffey, and Nik James.



These popular and prolific authors write American Westerns, historical romance, contemporary suspense, mystery, cozy fantasy, and young adult novels. They are four-time Rita Award Finalists and the winners of numerous awards for their writing, including a Will Rogers Medallion for Western Fiction, the Daphne Du Maurier Award for Excellence, the Romantic Times Magazine Reviewers' Choice Award, three NJRW Golden Leaf

Awards, two Holt Medallions, and the Connecticut Press Club Award for Best Fiction. Their work is included in the Popular Culture Library collection of the National Museum of Scotland.



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