

MAY MCGOLDRICK  
NIK JAMES

BEYOND  
THE  
ECLIPSE

Elkhorn, Colorado — A Caleb Marlowe Novel



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BEYOND THE ECLIPSE  
ELKHORN, COLORADO - A CALEB MARLOWE  
NOVEL  
BOOK II



MAY MCGOLDRICK

with  
NIK JAMES

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## Chapter One



*Elkhorn, Colorado*  
*June 1878*

CALEB MARLOWE STEPPED out into glaring midday sun and stopped short on the wooden sidewalk. In the street two men, locked in battle, rolled under the nervous hooves of horses tied to a railing.

Each man, wild-eyed and disheveled, held a knife in one hand and the wrist of his foe in the other. Kicking and straining for some advantage, their ferocity was unflagging. Dirt and filth from the street covered their faces and torn clothes. Blood streamed from their noses and mouths and from cuts on arms and hands.

Between the spot where Caleb stood and the Belle Saloon, a few doors up, a small crowd of drunken miners followed. Forming a moving line of spectators, they shouted curses at the combatants and egged them on. Wagers on the outcome were being exchanged.

A few feet away, Sheila Burnett stood frozen on the boardwalk, staring at the spectacle with wide blue eyes.

Her pale summer dress, trimmed with modest lace at the collar and cuffs, seemed impossibly delicate amid the dust, noise, and profanity of Main Street. Beneath a straw bonnet tied with a blue ribbon, a few strands of dark hair had escaped to brush her cheeks.

For a moment Caleb forgot about the fight altogether.

She looked as though she belonged in a drawing room back East, not in the middle of a Colorado mining town where two grown men were trying to carve each other open before noon.

He stepped beside her.

"Morning, Sheila."

She glanced up at him, clearly relieved to see a familiar face.

"Is this normal?"

"Depends." Caleb folded his arms and watched one of the fighters lose his grip on his knife. "If they kill each other before dinner, I'd call it a busy day."

Her expression suggested she wasn't entirely certain he was joking.

Right then, across Elkhorn's Main Street, a deputy emerged from door of the jail. He cast one look at the fight and the growing crowd of spectators, and skulked off down the street in the opposite direction. If any shooting started, he didn't want to be anywhere nearby.

The fighters rolled out toward the middle of the street, joined now by a barking street dog that was biting at booted ankles and torn woolen trousers.

Caleb nodded toward the scene.

"Just waiting for the brass band to arrive."

She looked at him.

"What?"

"Couple of beer vendors. Maybe somebody selling apples and meat pies. Then we'll have ourselves a proper festival."

Despite herself, the corner of her mouth twitched.

"Aren't you going to get involved?"

Caleb considered it for all of half a second before dismissing the idea.

"Nope. I'm no longer a lawman." He had no intention of throwing himself between two fools whose disagreement might have started over a bumped shoulder or a spilled drink. He'd seen such fights before. He'd see them again.

The sound of a gunshot down the street drew Caleb's eye for a moment. The noon stage was leaving.

At the same moment, one of the fighters lurched closer. Caleb touched Sheila's elbow and gently guided her backward. Without really thinking about it, he moved slightly in front of her, putting himself between her and the brawlers.

The gesture felt natural.

Too natural.

When he glanced back, the two men were on their feet and circling warily, their knives flashing in the sun. One said something. The other nodded. The dog walked off, bored. They both lowered their hands and backed away. It was over—for now—and the crowd began to jeer disapprovingly before turning to wend its way back through wagons and horses toward the Belle.

Sheila let out a slow breath.

"I don't think I'll get used to this."

"Does that mean you're heading back to New York City?"

She looked at him for a moment before answering.

"Do you want me to?"

The question caught him off guard.

Immediately, his mind betrayed him.

He remembered the accidental kiss they'd shared before. Barely a touch. Just the briefest meeting of lips. Yet somehow the memory had taken on a life of its own. More than once he'd found himself thinking about it while riding herd or lying awake at night listening to the wind outside his cabin.

"No," he said quietly. "But I want you happy. And safe."

A faint blush appeared in her cheeks.

"That's very kind of you, Marlowe."

"Wasn't meaning to be kind. Just honest."

For a second neither of them spoke.

Then she lowered her eyes.

"I should be on my way."

"Probably."

She gave him a small nod and continued down the boardwalk.

Caleb watched her go.

That was becoming a habit he needed to break.

She unsettled him in ways he wasn't prepared for. Made him think about things he'd spent years avoiding. Things like staying in one place. Building something permanent. Having someone waiting when he came home from a hard day of wrangling cattle.

Dangerous thoughts.

He tore his gaze away and turned his attention back to the street.

As the drinkers went back to their bottles and the card players back to their games, Caleb's eyes were drawn to heavy clouds of black smoke rising in the distance beyond the jumbled line of buildings across Main Street. There were dozens of mining claims being worked in the rugged landscape up there, but the smoke was coming from the jagged scar of a logging cut. The operation was doing its best to carve up the green spruce forest that ran up to the craggy ridges to the north. Elkhorn was growing, and it needed lumber.

The Wells Fargo stagecoach racketed past, heading east out of town toward Denver and raising dust in the bustling street. The driver cracked his whip and shouted curses at miners and drifters, riders and carters, women and children, and anyone else in his path.

Caleb was getting tired of waiting, and he ran his gaze along the street. It seemed like every time he came into Elkhorn, there were more buildings, more people, more fights, more noise.

Sheila was right in being shocked with all of this. The fighting part, anyway. The rest of it, some liked to call it progress.

From where he stood, he counted five new buildings under construction along Main Street alone. The sounds of saws and hammering could be heard coming from the closest one, another hotel.

As he watched, two barefooted youngsters, no more than ten years old, raced across the street carrying scraps

of wood they'd nicked from the building site. Shouts from the builders followed them as they weaved between wagons and carts and horses and disappeared into an alley across the way.

Caleb pulled off his wide-brimmed black hat and combed his fingers through his sandy brown hair before putting it back on. He didn't like hanging around town. The usual restlessness was gnawing at him. It was the same feeling he got every time he spent too much time in a crowd.

Right now, he'd like nothing better than to go collect his horse, leave the congested streets behind him, and ride back out to the quiet, open space of his fledgling ranch. He had a great many things to do there. He still hadn't had time to hang the damn door on the cabin he was building. He had to check on the new calves. Finish fencing off the small pasture for the bull. Build the barn. Attend to a dozen other chores.

But besides all that, Caleb didn't like waiting on anyone.

He glanced at the sign above his head. *H. D. Patterson, Justice of the Peace*. The very man who was keeping him here. In smaller letters, the sign read, *Land and Mine Sales, Side Door*. Caleb had no doubt there was a line of men standing around the corner right now, waiting to hand over their money in exchange for the hope of sudden wealth in the silver-rich hills around the town.

The wooden boards beneath his feet shook in warning as the front door swung open and Horace D. Patterson himself appeared.

"Marlowe, sorry to keep you waiting." The judge nodded to the hulking bodyguard on his heels. "Fredericks here

seemed to think you'd already be halfway to your ranch. I told him that was nonsense. You agreed to share a meal with me."

At the notion of "Frissy" Fredericks thinking anything at all, Caleb had to bite back a comment. He glanced up at the small black eyes that glittered like pieces of coal in the blotchy white pig face. Not a friendly look.

Caleb had little choice in the matter, though. He couldn't afford to alienate the judge. His partner's release from the city jail in Denver still rested on the man's goodwill...and his influence with the governor.

Patterson gestured down the street, and Caleb walked beside him. Frissy stumped along behind.

"I thought we'd try out the dining room in the new hotel down on this side of Main Street," the judge said. "The cook worked in the kitchens of no less a place than the Gardner House Hotel in Chicago. And now he's right here in Elkhorn."

Caleb didn't give a hoot where the cook came from, whether it was Chicago or Timbuktu. Beef was beef, and before the year was out, he'd be the one supplying it.

Patterson broke into his thoughts. "Not that I think that would impress you, Marlowe. But it's one more thing that makes me proud of the direction Elkhorn is heading."

Two well-dressed young women approached them, and the men stood aside to let them pass.

"Good day, Judge."

"Good day to you, ladies." He tipped his hat to them.

The women—all bonnets, ruffles, and kid gloves—had their eyes on Caleb as they passed. One was wearing a

plumb-colored dress that had black buttons the size of twenty-dollar gold pieces. The other wore pale blue, trimmed with enough dark cord to truss a gaggle of geese.

As they continued along, the judge told him, "Those two run the reception committee planning the solar eclipse events."

From what he'd heard from Doc, that was one of the projects Sheila was getting involved with too.

The event was to occur at the end of July, and Elkhorn was reported to be a prime location for seeing it.

"I have no doubt our festivities—parade, formal reception, and assembly—will outshine any show the governor puts on in Denver." He paused and motioned back to where they'd come from. "I'll put the viewing stand up right on the street in front of my office. Bunting and all."

As they reached the next corner, an explosive detonated beyond the western end of town. Miners. Caleb didn't think twice about it. At his ranch, he heard the blasts echoing along the ridges all the time.

Frissy, however, seizing on the chance to do his job, bulled past Caleb, leaving in his wake the smell of brandy and tobacco.

His employer waved him off. "Just some dynamiting at the mining works, Fredericks. Nothing to be alarmed about."

They crossed the street, and three pillars of the community exchanged greetings with the judge. Caleb recognized one of them as the president of the Elkhorn Bank and another as the manager of the Wells Fargo Overland office. He didn't know the third man.

“Gentlemen,” Patterson said, pausing for only a moment. “I’d like you to come to my office at four o’clock. I received a letter from the governor this morning.”

Horace D. Patterson was a man of importance, and everyone knew it. He owned Elkhorn. And what he didn’t care to own, he still controlled. Of medium height, he had a solid build and graying hair beneath his bowler that gave him an air of respectability. He was clean-shaven, but sported long, thick side whiskers. On the rare occasion that he stood still, he liked to slip one hand—Napoleon-like—inside the silver-gray waistcoat he wore beneath his charcoal suit. Caleb had seen a sculpture of the old tyrant in the judge’s office.

Across Main Street, a crowd was spilling out of the open doors of one of the many saloons and gathering in the street. From the center of the throng, three shots cracked in the air, accompanied by some wild whooping. A miner was celebrating some good fortune. He was staggering a little and waving a fistful of paper money in one hand and brandishing his smoking six-shooter in the other. He fired two more in the air. The last one took a chunk of wood off the molding at the top of the saloon’s façade.

“Blast him!” Patterson exploded. “Is this the kind of behavior that our visitors need to be seeing next month?”

He made a quick gesture with his hand to Frissy, who turned and whistled shrilly to a man who slouched against the streetlamp at the corner. The lone surviving deputy after the recent debacle with the town’s last sheriff. Getting the message, the deputy spat out the twig hanging from his lips and trotted toward the disturbance.

“This is exactly why I’ve been harping in your ear, Marlowe. This town needs a firm hand to guide it toward civilization. Your hand.”

“You got a sheriff. Zeke will do just fine.”

At Caleb’s suggestion, the judge had given the badge to Zeke Vernon after the last sheriff and his rogue band came to a fitting end only ten days ago. As a miner with a nearly pinched out claim, Zeke had already been working for Patterson when the need arose. He was no quick draw artist, but he was a good man. Solid as a rock and dependable as an old dog.

A curtain moved in one of the rooms above the saloon, catching Caleb’s eye. As the window started to open, he instinctively unfastened the thongs over the hammers of his twin Colts. A blond head emerged from the window. It was one of the women who worked the tables downstairs, looking to see what the shooting was about.

“Looks like you got everything under control, Judge.” Caleb nodded toward the disturbance. The deputy had pushed to the center of the crowd, and the exuberant miner promptly holstered his pistol and pointed toward the saloon.

“Zeke Vernon is a good man, but he lacks experience,” Patterson persisted. “He’ll need help. Consider it a temporary position, if you must.”

Watching the crowd break up and make its way back into the saloon, Caleb thought about being stuck in Elkhorn, jailing drunkards and breaking up street fights. He’d done this kind of job before, and he’d told himself, never again.

One positive thing was that he'd see Sheila more often. But did he want to?

"I got a ranch to run, Judge." He tapped the elk skin vest he wore over his brown wool shirt. "I don't need to wear no tin star to raise cattle."

Patterson took hold of his arm and steered him along the sidewalk. He wasn't a man to take no for an answer.

"It's only six weeks until our most important visitors begin to arrive. The number of people here in Elkhorn could double or even triple between now and then. The hotels will be full, and the saloons will be packed with men of all kinds. Without you to keep order, trouble could ruin our city's reputation at a critical juncture in our..."

The man continued to talk, but Caleb stopped listening.

He'd taken a deputy's badge for the judge last month and done what was needed. He'd left his ranch and gone up into the wilderness beyond Devil's Claw. He'd hunted down the outlaws who were holding up the Wells Fargo stagecoaches. He had fulfilled his end of a bargain. He didn't owe the judge a thing. It was the other way around now, and that was the way he liked it.

Like river mist on summer morning, all sounds and thoughts of the discussion disappeared, burned off by the prickling sensation down the back of Caleb's neck. He sensed trouble, and his instincts were rarely wrong.

On the far side of an alleyway ahead of them, a boy tapping a stick on a hitching post stopped short, his eyes widening as he caught sight of something or someone around the corner of the building, just out of Caleb's line of vision.

A moment later, the gleaming muzzle of a pistol appeared. Then, the brown brim of a stovepipe hat and the eye of a gunman.

It was an ambush.

## Chapter Two



THE GUNHAWK SWUNG QUICKLY and smoothly around the corner, the Remington in his left hand cocked and ready. Beneath the tall hat, battered and worn, hard dark eyes fixed on his target. The killer wore a dusty black bandana around his neck, half hidden by the long bush of a beard. A brown wool coat over a black and gray checked vest. Light brown pants tucked into worn boots. As he moved into the open, another Remington appeared in his right hand, coming up quickly.

The judge was still talking, unaware that Destiny was taking deadly aim.

It was one of those times when the blood fired up and everything outside of a man slowed down. The light and shadows and colors and sounds became sharp and crisp as an autumn morning.

Lightning didn't strike as fast as Caleb's draw. The twin Colts leapt into his hands, and he slammed his shoulder into the older man, sending Patterson tumbling into a line of barrels in front of the general store.

The Remington in the outlaw's left hand spit fire, and the air moved with a *thup* sound an inch from Caleb's ear. It was a bullet that would have caught the judge right between the eyes.

But the shooter's target had moved on him, and his gaze flicked toward the cause of the miss.

Caleb's face would be the last thing he saw in this life.

The Colts barked in rapid succession, like a drummer's roll on a battle march. The first struck the man square in the chest, the second knocked his head back. The Remington fired a bullet into the wooden sidewalk a foot in front of him. The attacker sagged forward and collapsed onto his side, motionless.

The judge had landed on a keg, where he sat with his back against the wall of the store. Frissy's Colt looked like a toy in his massive hand, and he was scowling in the direction of the dead assailant.

Caleb's eyes raked across the walkway and the street and back to where they'd come from, looking for more gunmen. In his experience, ambushers rarely worked alone.

In the street and all around him, everyone was standing still, staring, unable to make their brains comprehend what was happening. Only the agitated horses up and down the block were moving. When two more bullets cracked and thudded into the storefront behind Caleb, the street exploded with shouts and cries and people running for cover.

It took only an instant for his eyes to locate the gunman. He was the sole person not moving.

The judge saw him too. "Don't kill him!" he barked. "I want that blackguard alive!"

Caleb felt like a duck in a barrel. Too many innocent lives stood in the way, but he had to stop the man. Fredericks dove toward his employer, and his huge frame banged against Caleb, jarring him as he passed.

A few inches over six feet, Caleb was nearly two hundred pounds. He was not a man to be moved easily, but Frissy had a good sixty pounds on him. The bodyguard's momentum drove him three feet along the sidewalk, but he fired as he moved, sending the pistoleer crashing into the dirt. He squirmed and then lay still.

A window next to the judge shattered.

A third killer had been trailing them, but his gunning days were nearly over. Frissy fired and the man dropped from sight.

Three attackers. Three dead.

Caleb pouched one of his Colts and leapt down into the street. His gaze swept the crowd for more of them. He raced toward the downed man. The attacker hadn't moved and his revolver lay far from his reach, but he wanted to make sure.

Before he could get to the man, though, two more shots rang out from somewhere across the way. They weren't done.

Without breaking stride, Caleb scanned the dozens of windows for the shooter. A pistol barked as a puff of dirt rose just to his right. He spotted where it came from. A smoking muzzle was sticking out of a second floor window above the oldest saloon in Elkhorn. Almost directly across.

He fired twice at the window, shattering the pane, and the gun disappeared. Caleb ran hard, scanning the street constantly. There was no telling if there were more of these dogs waiting for their chance.

Behind him, the judge's shouts reached him. He wanted the man alive.

When Caleb reached the far side, he vaulted up onto the walkway. The old saloon had two large windows facing the street, and they were crowded with the grizzled, wide-eyed visages of men peering out.

Damn. No way to know who was friend and who was foe.

Drawing his other Colt, Caleb burst through the saloon's open door, spinning and pointing his six-shooters at the onlookers as he backed into the center of the brandy-hole.

The bar was a shabby, smoky, dismal place, thrown up when the rest of Elkhorn consisted mainly of tents and lean-tos. A counter about eight feet long ran along the right side of the dark room. Two rows of empty tables lined up haphazardly on the left. They were filled with cards and half-empty glasses. Chairs were pushed back or tipped over.

Miners and saddle slickers at the front windows stood gaping at him.

More shots were exchanged between the street and the upstairs window.

"Drop the irons." He wasn't taking any chances. "Now!"

The men complied, hurriedly unbuckling gun belts and laying weapons on the floor.

Caleb glanced at the barman, a balding, bearded Irishman wearing an ancient green vest over a dingy

collarless shirt. The man wiped his hands on the filthy apron tied around his waist and raised them quickly as he nodded at a set of stairs by the back wall.

“Got a gun?” Caleb barked.

The saloon keeper nodded.

“Show it.”

Without taking his eyes off of Caleb, he cautiously pulled a short-barreled Parker coach gun from under the counter, holding it away from his body.

“Keep them fellas covered. I don’t want nobody shooting me in the back. Any one of them makes a move for their rod, blast them.”

Relief showing on his face, the barman nodded and pointed the shotgun at his customers.

Caleb glanced at the stairs that led to a second floor. “Is there another way out?”

“The back door and the window at the top of the stair. It ain’t a big drop off the porch there.” The saloon keeper shrugged. “But we woulda heard boots above.”

The sound of shooting subsided, but that only meant the fella upstairs would be reloaded and ready for him.

Caleb moved to the bottom of the stairs and cast a quick look up. The unpainted wood wall of the hallway gave no clue as to what was waiting at the top. From where he stood, he could see the back window was open, but only a little. That meant the gunman was still there, and he had to know Caleb was coming for him.

He put himself in the man’s position. The odds of escaping were getting shorter by the minute. The only thing to do was to shoot his way out. His best chance was

to wait, take Caleb out as soon as he had a clear shot, then hightail it out the back way.

And the judge wanted this bushwhacker alive? That'd be a damned tall order.

At the bottom of the stairs, he reloaded his Colts. After pouching one, he started up as quietly as he could manage.

The stairway was low and narrow, and Caleb's broad shoulders filled the space. If this snake appeared at the top and started blasting, he'd have a hard time missing. When he was halfway up, the sound of crunching glass reached him. He judged the gunman was still in the front room. He paused on the top step with his back to the wall.

He glanced at the window, half expecting to see a shooter standing on the porch roof outside, drawing a bead on him. Nothing.

Caleb pulled off his hat and held it out beyond the corner for a second, but it drew no fire. He threw a quick look along the upstairs hallway.

Three doors opened onto the empty, dimly lit corridor. Two on the left were open. The door to the front room facing him at the end was shut.

He eased himself up the last step and moved stealthily down the hall, glancing into each room as he passed. Every nerve in his body was alert, every muscle taut. There wasn't a sound coming from the barroom below or from the street. Every soul in creation was listening.

He kept his eye on the door to the front room. The killer was in there, poised and quiet as a cougar on the hunt.

Caleb knew how quick his own reflexes were, and his aim was as deadly as anyone's. But in the split second after

he opened the door, he'd need to find that knothed and somehow wing him. No matter what the judge wanted, he didn't plan to take a bullet himself.

When he reached the door to the front room, he kicked it open, splintering the wood around the latch. The smoky air reeked with the smell of sulfur.

A slug hit the jamb, burying itself in the wood with a bang.

Caleb dropped down on one knee, leaned forward, and fired twice into the room before quickly pulling back.

He caught only a partial glimpse of the assassin. Over by the window, he was barricaded behind a chest of drawers with the mattress thrown over the top.

That brief look was enough for the gunman, though.

"Damn me," the man chirped. "It *is* you, ain't it."

It wasn't a question.

"Caleb," came the voice again. "Caleb Starr!"

*Damn it to hell.*

## 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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