

May McGoldrick Nik James



THE COMPLETE TRILOGY

◆ Beyond the Silver Moon ◆

◆ Beyond the Eclipse ◆

Beyond the Christmas Star

Will Rogers Medallion Award Winner

May McGoldrick Nik James



THE COMPLETE TRILOGY

◆ Beyond the Silver Moon ◆

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Beyond the Christmas Star



CALEB MARLOWE WESTERNS: THE
COMPLETE TRILOGY

Beyond the Silver Moon, Beyond the Eclipse, and Beyond the
Christmas Star

MAY MCGOLDRICK

with

NIK JAMES

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MAY MCGOLDRICK
NIK JAMES

BEYOND
THE SILVER
MOON

Elkhorn, Colorado — A Caleb Marlowe Novel



Elkhorn, Colorado, May 1878

THE SCENT of fresh-cut pine hung in the night air, sharp and clean, mingling with woodsmoke and the cool mountain breeze slipping through the unfinished cabin doorway. Caleb Marlowe stretched his shoulders and watched the embers of the fire throw flickering shadows on the new cabin walls.

Outside, a muffled sound drew his attention, and Caleb focused on the door at the same time Bear lifted his great head. The thick, golden fur on the neck of the dog rose, and the low growl told Caleb that his own instincts were not wrong.

In an instant, both man and dog were on their feet.

Caleb signaled for the big, yellow animal to stay and reached for his Winchester '73. The .44-caliber rifle was leaning against the new pine boards he'd nailed up not two hours before. He glanced once around the rough cabin—the first real place that had belonged to him in longer than he

cared to remember. If he'd had time to hang the door, whoever was out there might have gotten the drop on him.

The broad fields gleamed like undulating waves of silver under the May moon between the wooded ridges that formed the east and west boundaries of his property. Down the slope from the cabin, by a bend in the shallow river, he could see the newly purchased cattle settled for the night. His cattle. His land. His future.

Caleb slipped outside into the cool mountain air and moved silently along the wall of the nearly finished cabin. Bear moved ahead of him and disappeared into the shadow cast by the building. The crisp breeze was light and coming out of the north, from the direction of Elkhorn, three miles away as the crow flies.

Most men would've built closer to town. Closer to help. Closer to people. But Caleb had spent too much of his life around violence and hard men. Out here, with the mountains and the river and the silence, a man could almost believe he might leave the past behind.

Bear growled low again. Six riders came out of the tall pines, moving slowly along the eastern edge of the meadow.

He had no doubt as to their intentions. They were rustlers, and they were after his cattle. But this was his property—his and Henry's—and that included those steers.

He'd fought too long and wandered too far to lose this place now.

He needed to get a little closer to these snakes. Standing a couple inches over six feet with broad shoulders and solid muscles, he was hardly an insignificant target,

even at night. His wagon was fifty yards nearer to them, but with this moon they'd spot him and come at him before he got halfway there. Beyond the wagon, there were half a dozen stone outcroppings, but nothing else to stop a bullet.

Just then, the cattle must have smelled them too, because they started grunting and moving restlessly. That was all the distraction he needed.

Staying low, Caleb ran hard, angling his path to get the wagon between him and the rustlers as quickly as he could.

He nearly made it.

The flash from the lead rider's rifle was accompanied by the crack of wood and an explosion of splinters above the sideboard of the wagon. A second shot struck the ground a few yards to Caleb's right. Immediately, with shouts and guns blazing, they came charging hard.

Caleb raised his Winchester and fired, quickly levering and firing again. The second shot caught the lead rider, knocking him backward from the saddle.

The others kept coming.

A hot line ripped across Caleb's stomach just above his belt, spinning him half around. Pain flared, sharp and sudden.

Too close, he thought, levering in another cartridge.

What followed was brief and brutal. When the shooting was done, four rustlers lay in the grass. The remaining pair had made a run for the pines above the meadow.

Caleb turned toward the forest, where the two men were boxed in by the ridge there. They were cornered, and cornered men were dangerous.

With Bear moving like a ghost beside him, Caleb tracked them through the dark timber.

When it was over, they were dead, and Caleb rested a hand briefly against Bear's neck. "You done good, boy."

This dog had been beside him through lonely camps, hard winters, and too many dangerous trails to count. Truth be told, Bear was the closest thing he had to family.

Only then did Caleb feel the sting from the bullet crease along his stomach. Pulling aside his torn shirt, he checked the wound. It bled some, but not badly.

For a moment he stood there in the cold mountain silence, breathing hard. He thought about what he'd nearly lost.

A cabin. A herd. A stretch of river valley. Maybe even peace someday. Strange how fast a man could lose everything he'd barely started building.

A few minutes later, with the rustlers tethered across their saddles, Caleb led the horses back down through the pine forest.

As he neared the meadow, Bear stopped abruptly and lifted his nose into the wind.

Caleb immediately froze.

In the darkness at the edge of the forest, another rider—wearing a bowler and a canvas duster—was peering out at the unfinished cabin and the saddled horses grazing in the silvery field.

Caleb silently looped the reins over a low branch and raised his Winchester.

"All right," he called coldly. "Raise your hands where I can see them."

Slowly, the rider obeyed. Bear trotted forward and sniffed curiously at the stranger's boot.

"Start talking," Caleb demanded.

The rider turned slightly in the saddle, and a shaft of moonlight illuminated her face.

A woman's face.

And a beautiful one at that.

For the first time all night, Caleb found himself caught completely off guard.

"I was coming after you, Mr. Marlowe," she said, gesturing toward the grazing animals. "But the men who were riding those horses got here first."

CALEB APPROACHED THE WOMAN CAUTIOUSLY. Right now, he was trying to ignore the hollow feeling that always followed violence. The shooting was over, but the tension still clung to him like gun smoke. And even though his instincts told him this rider meant no harm, he had no assurance she wasn't carrying a firearm beneath that canvas duster.

"You are Mr. Marlowe, aren't you?"

"I am. What's your connection with those fellas, ma'am?"

The rider tilted her head slightly. "Oh, I have no connection with them whatsoever. I was coming to find you when I saw them leaving Elkhorn ahead of me."

"And you followed?" His tone sharpened despite himself. Following six strangers through mountain country in the middle of the night was reckless enough to get a person killed.

"I heard one of them mention your name." She matched his tone easily enough. "I assumed following them would be the quickest way to find your ranch. Though I'll admit they looked rather dangerous, so I stayed well behind."

There was intelligence in her voice. Determination, too. But not much caution.

He studied her a moment longer. The moonlight silvered the brim of the borrowed bowler and softened the sharp edges of her expression. She sat straight in the saddle despite the late hour and rough country, as though she'd spent her life riding through dangerous mountain passes. But something about her told Caleb that she was a newcomer from back East.

And too proud to show fear, he thought.

"I must admit," she continued, "when they left the road and entered the forest, I became rather lost. Then I heard the gunfire." Her gaze drifted toward the meadow. "I hope there was no serious trouble."

Caleb nearly laughed at that.

"Depends on who you ask." He nodded toward the horse beneath her. "Ain't that Doc Burnett's gelding?"

"Yes, it is."

"Who are you, ma'am, and what are you doing with his horse?"

She removed the bowler, and a thick braid tumbled over one shoulder in the moonlight.

"I'm Sheila Burnett. Dr. Burnett is my father. From his letters, I understand you're a friend of his."

Caleb blinked in surprise.

Doc Burnett was one of the few men in Elkhorn Caleb trusted completely. But from the way the doctor spoke of his daughter, Caleb had pictured someone much younger. A girl still safely back East with civilized manners and civilized problems.

Not a woman riding alone through the Rockies at midnight.

And certainly not one with eyes that clear and steady.

"Why the devil are you riding around the mountains alone at this hour, Miss Burnett?" Caleb demanded.

Perhaps his tone came out harsher than intended because Bear gave him a brief look before trotting off toward the trees.

"That's precisely the problem, Mr. Marlowe. My father didn't send me." Her composure faltered for the first time. "I arrived from Denver yesterday and discovered he's gone missing."

The edge in her voice softened slightly on the final words, and Caleb suddenly heard the worry beneath the stubbornness.

"I need your help finding him."

Caleb frowned.

He'd seen Doc only two days ago, and the man was just fine. The doctor often disappeared into the mountains for days tending miners, ranchers, and whoever else needed patching together.

Still...

Doc had said nothing about his daughter arriving.

Caleb rested the rifle in the crook of his arm. "Your father can generally take care of himself, Miss Burnett." He glanced at her again. "Are you armed?"

"Of course not."

That answered that.

Back East, maybe a woman could afford to trust the world not to harm her. Out here, the mountains taught

different lessons.

“Was Doc expecting you?”

“In our letters, I mentioned I hoped to visit him.”

“Was he expecting you?” Caleb repeated patiently.

She hesitated. “Not exactly. Once I decided to come, a letter would have arrived too late. And as you know, Elkhorn doesn’t yet have telegraph service.”

Impetuous.

Brave.

And entirely unaware how dangerous this country could be.

Caleb exhaled slowly. He still had bodies to gather before dawn.

“If you wouldn’t mind moving out into the field there a ways, I’ll follow shortly. After I finish a few chores, I’ll take you back into town.”

“But what about finding my father?”

“We’ll discuss that once I get you safely back to Elkhorn.” He hoped his tone left little room for argument.

She folded her arms. “You seem remarkably calm for a man who was just ambushed.”

That caught him off guard enough that the corner of his mouth almost moved.

“Calm ain’t the same thing as careless, ma’am.”

Her gaze shifted toward the dark meadow. “And is this sort of thing common here?”

“More common than it ought to be.”

As Caleb turned toward the horses and the dead men lashed across the saddles, he heard Bear trot back toward them.

"And what's your name, fellow?" Sheila asked softly, crouching slightly toward the dog.

"That good boy is Bear," Caleb called over his shoulder. "Though usually he ain't one to introduce himself too quick."

Bear leaned against her skirts as though they were already acquainted.

Caleb frowned faintly at that.

Not many people earned the dog's trust so quickly.

A few minutes later Caleb led the horses from the trees and found Miss Burnett standing quietly beside her mount while Bear rested against her leg. She turned toward him—and went pale the instant she saw what the horses carried.

"These men are dead?" she whispered.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You killed them?"

"I did."

Her eyes widened as she stared at the bodies.

"You took their lives."

The words weren't accusing so much as stunned now.

"They came aiming to take mine first."

She looked away briefly, clearly struggling with the sight before her.

"You couldn't stop them without killing them?"

Caleb bit back his irritation.

Where she came from, maybe folks imagined gunfights happened slow enough for careful decisions and neat endings. Out here, hesitation got a man buried.

"When somebody starts firing at you in the dark," he said evenly, "you don't get much time for careful thinking."

She swallowed hard and looked again toward the bodies. Caleb saw not judgment in her face, but shock. Fear. Sadness.

"This is how people live here?" she asked quietly.

"Sometimes," Caleb answered. "Though most folks spend their lives hoping it won't come to this."

That seemed to settle over her differently.

Not approval.

But understanding.

"Take a step back, Miss Burnett," Caleb said more gently. "I need to finish up here."

As he led the horses forward, she moved aside quickly, though not before he noticed her hands trembling slightly in the moonlight.

She was trying hard not to let him see it.

Four bodies lay scattered between the pines and the cabin. When Caleb approached the nearest one, a low groan drifted from the man sprawled in the grass.

Bear immediately growled.

"It's all right, boy," Caleb said quietly. "He ain't going nowhere."

The rustler lay curled on his side, hat and rifle on the ground nearby. Caleb carefully nudged the fallen revolver farther away before kneeling.

"He's alive?" Sheila's voice came softly behind him.

"For now."

She moved closer.

The bullet had struck the man below the ribs. Even in the dim light, Caleb could tell the wound was bad.

“But these others...” Sheila looked around the meadow.
“They’re all dead.”

Her voice held sorrow now more than outrage.

“Would you mind helping me here, Miss Burnett?”

She looked startled by the request. “Of course. What can I do?”

There was something of her father in that — the instinct toward help rather than away from it. And for the first time since meeting her, the sharp edge between them eased slightly.

“There’s a lantern hanging beside the hearth inside the cabin. Could you light it and bring it back?”

She nodded immediately and hurried toward the cabin.

Caleb gently rolled the wounded rustler onto his back.

“I’m sorry for coming after you,” the man rasped weakly.
“We only meant to take the cattle.”

Caleb glanced toward the dark silhouette of his unfinished cabin.

His home.

“Save your strength, fella.”

“Ain’t much point now.” The man coughed painfully.
“Listen. I got a ma back in Michigan...”

Caleb studied him a moment. Late twenties, maybe. Young enough that life should’ve stretched farther ahead than this lonely Colorado meadow.

“You’ll see her again,” Caleb said quietly, though he doubted it himself.

The man clutched weakly at Caleb’s sleeve.

“Letter...inside pocket...”

“I’ll see she gets it.”

Footsteps approached through the grass as Sheila returned carrying the lantern.

The rustler's breathing hitched once. Then stopped.

Caleb lowered his eyes briefly before reaching into the man's coat for the letter.

Sheila came closer holding the lantern high.

"Is he...?"

"Gone."

Silence settled heavily between them.

Finally she whispered, "Six men."

She looked around the moonlit meadow, visibly shaken. But there was no longer any shock in her voice. She simply sounded...well, heartsick.

Suddenly, Caleb regretted that this was the first thing Doc Burnett's daughter had seen of Colorado.

"If you could gather the horses," he said quietly, "I'll get these men loaded up, and we'll head back to town."

"Of course," she answered softly.

Then she looked up at him again.

"I still don't understand how a man survives with this much violence around him."

That landed differently than before. No condemnation in it. Just honest confusion — the kind that deserved an honest answer.

Caleb looked away toward the dark mountains.

"Most days," he admitted quietly, "you just keep moving and hope the next stretch of road's a little better."

Something in her expression softened then.

Not trust exactly. But the place where trust might take root, given time.

A cold breeze swept across the meadow.

Sheila shivered. That canvas duster she had on wasn't enough in the mountains.

Without really thinking about it, Caleb shrugged off his coat and handed it to her. "You'll freeze before we make Elkhorn otherwise."

She hesitated. "And what about you?"

"I've had colder nights."

For a moment she simply stared at him, surprised.

Then slowly, she accepted the coat. "Thank you, Mr. Marlowe."

Caleb gave a brief nod and turned toward the bodies lying beneath the silver moon, uneasy with the thought that Doc Burnett's sharp-eyed daughter had already gotten further past his guard than six, armed rustlers ever had.

DOC BURNETT carefully peeled away the surgical gauze covering the woman's wound. The operation had gone as well as could be expected under the circumstances. Holding the lantern closer, he examined the injury above her right breast.

The skin around the bullet hole was swollen and angry red, but so far there was no sign of infection.

That, at least, was something to be grateful for.

Only a few hours had passed since he'd removed the bullet and closed the wound, and now her life rested as much in Providence's hands as his own.

If her luck held, she'd live. For now. But with these killers holding them prisoner, he didn't know for how long. The odds weren't too good that he'd survive this either.

Doc glanced over at the two open Wells Fargo strongboxes in the corner of the shack, their contents scattered across the floor. Bundles of unwanted letters lay among the debris, abandoned after the robbers stripped away whatever gold or valuables had been inside.

Doc had heard enough stories over the years about road agents kidnapping wealthy travelers for ransom. Occasionally the victims were returned alive.

But not often.

Smith—a miner Doc barely knew except by sight—had come for him yesterday morning claiming there'd been an accident outside town. The man had been twitchy as a cat in a thunderstorm, but that alone meant little in silver country. Digging in the earth made men a mite strange sometimes. Mining had a way of twisting fellows inside out.

So Doc grabbed his medical valise and went with him.

They had barely cleared Elkhorn when two grim-faced gunslingers came out from behind a clump of pines.

Their clothes showed the grime of long use, and their boots were scuffed and worn from the brush and brambles of the Colorado terrain. Each wore a brace of Remingtons on his gun belt. One man had a Winchester in his rifle scabbard. The other, a Henry rifle.

The sight itself didn't truly surprise Doc. Road agents haunted the Rockies same as wolves haunted the forests. The real shock came less than thirty minutes later when one of the gunmen abruptly shot Smith and sent him tumbling lifeless into the ravine beside the trail.

Stone-cold killers.

Doc looked away from the memory and adjusted the lantern wick slightly lower. Outside the shack, the night wind sighed softly through the pines.

The outlaws had ridden east for hours after that, leaving the Denver road and winding through forests of fir and cottonwood. Sometimes they followed a roaring river

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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