

The Travels of Caleb Walker
Episode 1: Sunset House

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From the Journal of Caleb Walker

It is hard to believe that a year has passed since the loss of my Emily and Jesse. With their passing, I have since lost faith in my God and myself. I have spent the last year wandering the Arizona Territories in search of a place to call home, but how can anywhere truly be a home without my loved ones to fill it. Some might say that I am actually searching for myself. Either way, I continue my travels.

April 5, 1848

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"Momma!"

"Don't move baby, don't move. Just hold real still."

The woman edged closer to her son, panic straining her features. Her terrified gaze flitted back and forth between her child and the rattlesnake at his feet. Every tear that ran down the little boy's cheek was a stab to her heart. She said a silent prayer. Lord please, he's only four years old. It's my fault, I should have been watching him closer, don't make him pay for my carelessness. Gently she slid her right foot forward. The last thing she wanted to do was startle the snake. She was still too far away to make a grab for the boy. The strong Arizona sun beat down upon mother and child, adding to the unbearable tension. The rattler shook its tail, the rattling sound warning of imminent attack, freezing the woman in her tracks. Her child stood trembling, an imploring look of desperation written across his tear-streaked face. Another warning rattle sounded. It was then that the young child's nerve broke and he made to flee towards his mother.

Almost simultaneously, three things occurred: the rattler struck out at the child, the mother screamed and a gunshot erupted. The woman was stunned to silence as the rattlesnake disappeared in an explosion of dirt, blood and sinew. Gathering her frightened child into her arms, the woman turned towards the gunshot source. Her gaze fell on a stranger sitting astride a

palomino, his gun still drawn, smoke rising listlessly from the barrel.

"Thank God for your timely arrival," she said, relief etched on her face.

The stranger holstered his weapon, drawing his travel-worn, duster over the gun butt, but not before the woman spied the cross hanging around his neck. Cold gray eyes peered out beneath his flat-crowned hat. "God don't have no say in what I do these days ma'am." With a touch to the brim, the stranger turned his horse. Making soothing sounds to her sobbing child, the woman watched the gunman ride away.

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Time lost all meaning in the Arizona territory, with its vast tracks of desert, saguaro cactus plants, mesquite trees, and dry heat. Caleb Walker rode into the desert, lost in his memories that the endangered child had ignited: the Indian attack on the wagon train, followed almost immediately by the painful loss of his own son to fever and then the loss of his wife, Ellie, to the same illness just days later. In the span of just two weeks, Caleb had lost everything he cared about, including his faith. No, God had no say now in the former preacher's life. Caleb glanced up at the afternoon sky, taking a drink from his canteen. Silence followed the gunman as his horse

plodded across the sere plain, shrouding him in a cocoon of false peace.

Stopping to get his bearings, Caleb heard the screeching cries of vultures. Ahead on the horizon, he could see the ungainly birds plunge to the earth. Hidden by a small dune, he could not see what the scavengers were feasting upon, but he could imagine the grim scene.

Coming over the rise, Caleb took in the horde of vultures gorging themselves on two corpses. Disgusted, he drew his Colt Dragoon and fired a shot into the air. Startled, the vultures launched into the sky, with the exception of one.

The lone predator craned its neck about to peer at the gunman. Odd red eyes bored into Caleb's gray ones, before joining the rest of the fleeing birds. Holstering the heavy six-gun, he rode down the dune to view the carnage.

Dismounting, the gunman stalked to the desecrated human remains. Both were men who appeared to be or were (he silently amended) in their early twenties. Entrails lay exposed to the dry Arizona heat, one with his eyes staring sightlessly into the blue sky. Caleb closed the eyes and more from habit than any true faith, he recited the Lord's Prayer.

The former preacher spent the next hour digging a shallow grave and dumping the bodies within. After covering the corpses and taking time to reload his gun, Caleb mounted his palomino

and resumed his journey. As he rode, it occurred to him that the men must have been dead for some time, as there was very little blood, despite the ravaging by the vultures.

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The sun had begun its descent, when a sandstorm struck without warning, virtually blinding him. Keeping the grating wind at his back, Caleb guided his horse southwest. He rode wearily on, aware that the nearest town, Gila City was more than a day away.

Several times during his trek, Caleb got the sensation of eyes tracking him. Scanning his bleak surroundings through the wind-born sand, Caleb thought he glimpsed a rough outline of a figure in the distance but when he blinked the grit from his eyes, the figure had vanished. Probably just a cactus he thought, still he could not shake the feeling of someone watching him.

The sun had nearly set, when he stumbled upon the house, the sun's rays painting the house in varying shades of red, from the pilaster-flanked front entry to the heavy stone sills and the ornate roof balustrades. Caleb dismounted and led his horse to the front steps, as a young woman exited the house. Caleb felt his gut tighten and caught himself reaching for his gun. The young woman wore a buckskin dress and had bead and feather-work, woven into her long, silky black hair. Irrational though

it may be, since the wagon attack, Caleb was distrustful of all Indian people.

"Good evening sir. I have been sent to see to your animal." Despite the harsh winds, Caleb had little trouble hearing her words, her voice carrying clearly, as if she had shouted. She held out her hands expectantly, yet the Indian maiden did not meet his gaze, focusing instead on the cross around his neck. Noticing her gaze, he tucked the cross beneath his shirt, as he handed her the reins and took down his saddlebags. Giving the horse a pat, the former preacher mounted the steps while the young woman led the palomino around back, glancing over her shoulder as she did so.

Heavy drapes covered the windows, preventing Caleb from seeing inside. Only one type of establishment uses such drapery he thought. Twin setting suns reflected from the door's brass hardware. Before he reached for the handle, the door opened, spilling forth light and soft music to greet him. A stunning blonde-haired woman stood in the doorway, beckoning him inside.

As Caleb passed the threshold, he could see several women lounging around in various stages of undress. While Caleb no longer thought of himself as a man of God, he could not help but feel uncomfortable in such a place. A petite, dark-skinned woman offered him a glass of sherry, which he graciously declined.

"I believe our guest would prefer a more potent drink. Bring him some whiskey, Leanne." The dark-skinned woman nodded and silently withdrew.

Caleb placed his saddlebags on the floor, studying the new arrival. Candlelight sparkled in her green eyes, her luxurious red, curly, hair falling in cascading waves to her slim waist, her dusky hued skin radiating health and vitality. Although the top of her head barely reached Caleb Walker's shoulder, she projected an aura of tremendous strength and authority.

"Greetings and welcome to Sunset House. I am the proprietor, Cassandra Jenkins."

Her smile was warm and inviting. Caleb could feel his pulse quicken and his throat constricting. It took a moment before he could find his voice. "Evening ma'am, name's Caleb Walker. 'fraid I'm a might lost. I don't recall a house like this on the trail to Gila City."

"Gila City? My, you certainly are lost. It's the storm. It can mislead a body. Gila City is miles away in the opposite direction, but that's not such a bad thing is it?" Again, her smile made Caleb's heart skip a beat. Leanne returned with a silver tray bearing a glass of whiskey, which he gratefully accepted. While he downed the drink, Caleb caught a glimpse of the young Indian woman peering from behind a thick velveteen

curtain. Outside, the storm's clamor began to fade, indicating its passage.

The red-haired woman spoke, her voice sultry and full of promise. "Perhaps I can offer you the company of one our ladies." A smattering of subdued laughter sang throughout the room. The way Cassandra emphasized the word 'company' caused Caleb additional discomfort and he could feel the blush rising up his neck and face. Returning the glass to the waiting tray, Caleb retrieved his saddlebags and shook his head. "Thanks anyway ma'am, but I believe I should be on my way."

"Well at least stay a while until the storm ebbs," said Cassandra. Her presence so close to his own seemed to draw the very breath from his lungs.

"Sounds to me as if the storm has already passed," Caleb countered.

"It's just a lull, I assure you. Storms around these parts are a might tricky." As if on cue, the wind sent up an unearthly howl, rattling the glass and setting the house to trembling.

Caleb paused in his exit. "Guess your right about that."

Smiling, Cassandra looped an arm through his and escorted him down a dimly lit hall. "Why don't I show you to a room where you can rest a spell?"

Strolling together arm-in-arm, Caleb wondered at the fact that with the obvious business transactions that would take place in such an establishment, that he seemed to be the only male in attendance. He voiced his concern.

"I reckon the storm is keeping the regular clientele away," replied his host.

Cassandra ushered Caleb into a sparsely furnished room, containing little more than a bed, a large chest and a small table supporting an oil lamp. Dim shadows danced about the walls from the flickering, smoky lamp. Caleb felt a prickle at the nape of his neck, something about the room tickled the edge of his senses. Surveying the room, it finally clicked . . . there were no windows. Before he could make an inquiry, the former preacher sensed movement directly behind him. Caleb reacted, but moved too slow. Struck from behind, stars exploded in his eyes. As darkness filled his vision, Caleb Walker glimpsed the young Indian woman staring at him, from behind Cassandra.

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Delicate hands shook Caleb violently, rousing him from a nightmare plagued sleep. His eyes reluctantly opened. Above him loomed the blurry visage of the Indian woman who had stabled his horse, a sincere look of worry painting her features. Slowly, Caleb sat up, wincing at the throbbing ache in his head. A bout of nausea and swimming vision forced Caleb to lie back down.

"Please, you must rise. You are in grave peril."

Once again, Caleb forced himself to a seated position, staving off the rising queasiness, taking several deep breaths. A quick scan confirmed that he was in the windowless room. From somewhere deep within the house, Caleb could hear the rhythmic cadence of muffled voices.

"What's going on?"

"Please, we must hurry. The ritual will reach the apex and they will come for you."

"Ritual? What in the world are you talking about, girl?"

"They are going to sacrifice you to their unholy guardian."

"Slow down. What are you saying exactly?"

"The women here have made a pact with a being of darkness. In exchange for power and longevity, they must offer a human sacrifice. With the bargain, they have become succubae."

Caleb contemplated the woman before him. On instinct, he wanted to disbelieve her, but her demeanor forced him to consider her words. Caleb shook his head an act he instantly regretted. He would deal with it later, for now he had other matters to consider.

"Where are my things?"

The young Indian woman pointed to the large chest at the end of the bed. Caleb's saddlebags, hat, duster and gun belt lay

piled on top. His hand went to the cross that he had tucked beneath his shirt, the one thing he had left from Ellie.

Caleb rose unsteadily to his feet, donning his gun belt and hat and checking the Colt six-gun, to be certain that it was loaded. After holstering his weapon and shrugging into his duster, he paused to regard the woman before him. "Why are you helping me?"

With a pleading look in her eyes she replied, "You are a holy man yes?"

"I was."

After a moment's stillness she spoke, her voice taking on an ethereal quality.

Rose of wood born from the east
The lost son wanders in search of peace
Shadows melt before his light
Freeing dawn from evil's blight

As the last syllable died out in the room, the young Indian woman reached out a slender hand; gently tracing the engraved rose on Caleb's rosewood-handled Colt and then looked up. Dark brown eyes peered into Caleb's cold gray orbs, silently beseeching him for his aid. Uncomfortable, he stepped back and set his flat-crowned hat firmly on his head. He desperately

wished to have nothing to do with this woman, but like it or not he could sense something familiar, something almost familial in her.

"Alright, I'm leaving. If you're coming then come," he said.

Caleb started for the door. As he stepped into the corridor, he glanced back into the room. The young woman had not moved. The intensity of the chanting escalated like a slow roll of thunder. Caleb returned to the woman.

"Are you coming or not?"

"I cannot. I am bound to this place as surely as they are bound to their guardian."

"Look, I don't want to leave you but . . ." Caleb paused, staring into a pair of desperate eyes. "Okay. How do we gain your freedom?"

A spark of hope bloomed in her eyes. "In the chamber, where they perform the ritual, there they hold the chain that binds me to this house."

The chanting reached a culmination as a shudder ran through the edifice. The temperature throughout the room plummeted so that Caleb could see his breath frosting in the air. The lights that were dim before seemed to struggle to produce even the slightest glimmer. An almost tangible silence fell over the house.

"We are too late. The guardian will soon appear."

The forlorn look and sadness in the young woman's voice were too much for Caleb to bear. Now he was angry. "Which way?"

"Please, you must save yourself; it is too late for me."

With an unnerving calm, Caleb repeated, "Which way?"

The hope that suffused the young woman's face spoke volumes to Caleb as she led him to a side corridor. Further, down the passageway the mismatched pair stopped at a lavishly carved oaken door. Caleb pressed an ear to the door, listening for any sounds coming from within. The former preacher raised a hand to silence the young woman, who nodded in return. Drawing his gun, he eased the door open a crack, peering through the gap. Seeing no one nearby, Caleb pushed the door open wider and stepped across the threshold into a softly lit chamber.

Gun still drawn, Caleb and the young woman crossed the unencumbered floor. The room contained nothing more than a few oil lamps, their flames low, spaced evenly throughout the room and a tapestry comprised of colored woolen threads worked on linen cloth. He could make out what appeared to be Latin inscriptions among the figures depicted and the border, which portrayed foliage, fantastic animals, and hunting scenes. Despite Caleb's attempts to ignore it, his eyes latched on to the isolated center image of a depraved beast feasting on the

flesh of mortal men. Caleb could not suppress a quiver of revulsion that ran through him.

A tap on his shoulder broke through Caleb's reverie. The Indian woman indicated that they needed to pass beyond the tapestry. For the first time it occurred to him that, the interior of the house appeared to be vastly larger than the exterior. Lifting the heavy cloth, Caleb and the woman stepped behind into another murky chamber filled with oily smoke, and unseasonably cool air.

Caleb halted his steps, allowing his eyes to adjust to the gloom. Several feet directly in front of him, thirteen vermillion robed women knelt on the ash wood floor, undulating slowly to some unheard melody. Thirteen stone pillars surrounded the cluster of kneeling bodies, with a raised dais at its center. Caleb's companion directed his attention to an alcove at the far side of the chamber.

Nodding, Caleb sidled to his right, keeping his eyes and gun trained on the unsuspecting assembly. Midway, he noticed movement in the shadowed alcove. Turning a questioning gaze towards his companion, Caleb was startled to discover that he was in fact alone; the young woman was gone. Cursing under his breath, he hesitated, unsure as to how to proceed. Thoughts of betrayal flooded his mind. A sudden shout from the group surprised him.

The women rose to their feet, reciting words that sounded foreign in Caleb's ears. Scarlet flames burst free of the dais, bathing the chamber with its reddish-orange glow. The unexpected glare blinded the gunman, forcing him to shut his eyes.

Calls of *Agrat-Bat-Mahlat* resonated throughout the chamber. Fiercely, Caleb scrubbed at his tear-flooded eyes. At first he thought, his blurred vision caused the image on the dais to waver, and then he judged the figure to be truly warped. The women once again recited, *Agrat-Bat-Mahlat*. The phrase kindled a spark of recognition in Caleb's memory. A sudden burst of inspiration thrust itself upon the former preacher, *Agrat-Bat-Mahlat*, the guardian of prostitutes but more infamously known as one of the four brides of Satan.

Caleb whispered, "Lord, help me."

Without thinking, he raised his gun and aiming at the deformed figure straddling the dais, centering on the demon's head. Before Caleb could squeeze the trigger, a golden nimbus enveloped the Colt. The guardian screeched a shrill defiant curse upon seeing his dazzling weapon. Every robed figure turned malevolent eyes towards him, snarling in outrage and displaying sharp canine incisors. Caleb squeezed off two thunderous shots.

Streaks of radiance thudded into the demon's cranium, rocking back its disfigured skull but otherwise leaving no marks of their passage. The demonic guardian stood transfixed,

apparently unaffected by the attack. *Agrat-Bat-Mahlat* managed one menacing step before halting. Golden blades of energy spitted the demon's head, quickly spreading throughout its misshapen anatomy. Pulsating lines of energy traced map-like trails across the ravaged body. The warped creature's maw opened in a silent scream of anguish. An abrupt flash and the demon was no more. The gun ceased to glow.

Howls of fury intruded upon the stunned former preacher. Backing away from the fanged women, Caleb knew the odds were not in his favor. He would never be able to reach the exit before they fell upon him. Offering up a silent prayer, Caleb Walker prepared to make his final stand. With one hand on his cross, he raised his six-gun, picking out Cassandra and fired. The **.44 caliber ball round** slammed into the petite red-haired woman, who shrugged off the shot as easily as shrugging off water. Three more shots followed, each with the same result. Caleb watched his death approach him.

Twin cries of "Hold!" resounded throughout the chamber.

The vermilion-clad women halted their advance and turned to face the speakers. There on the dais stood the young Indian woman and much to Caleb's astonishment a second woman stood alongside her, a mirror image of the first. With heads bowed and arms akimbo, palms up, the women spoke in a singsong cadence, "And it shall ever be that light shall triumph over the

darkness." The twin figures turned, facing each other, a soft melody falling from their lips and stepped forward toward each other. A dumbfounded Caleb stood immobilized as the twins merged into one being. A brilliant light filled the chamber, forcing him to shield his eyes. Shrill cries echoed, reaching a new crescendo and then as the light faded, silence. Caleb lowered his arms and allowed his eyes to adjust to the now seemingly dim light. The remains of the succubae, ragged cloth and grey ash, lay scattered about the chamber.

Holstering his weapon, he hesitantly strode forward, ashes swirling in his wake. Stopping before the dais, Caleb's cold gray eyes searched the face before him.

Caleb asked, "Who are you?"

"I am known to many as, Eos, Aurora, Rose Light, or simply the Dawn goddess."

A doubting Caleb replied, "That's some claim to make."

"I came to rid this land of the corruption, but failed and became a prisoner. This place, this blight on the world, was slowly poisoning the land and its people. In destroying it, you have redeemed the land."

"I thank you Caleb Walker. You have restored me to myself. If you will allow it, I will grant you a boon. I see a burden upon your soul. It is within my power to remove the painful memories of your past. Will you accept?"

Free of the pain Caleb considered, but only for a minute. "I don't think so. They're as much a part of me as the good memories."

Eos smiled, "As you wish. Fare thee well, until we meet again Caleb Walker, Dawn's Knight." A subdued glow enveloped the dawn goddess as she melted from view.

Securing his flat-crowned hat, Caleb nodded and exited the chamber. Silence followed along in his wake as he made his way through the halls. Stopping only to pick up his saddlebags, Caleb quickly exited the house.

Outside, he saddled his palomino and mounted. To the east, rosy fingers of light stretched across the horizon, announcing the coming dawn. An astonished Caleb Walker could only stare as the house dissipated in the growing daylight. Not a mark remained to indicate that an edifice had even existed. Caleb turned his horse and rode off into the desert.