

THE OUTLAW PROPHET



By Pete Garcia

The Daily Alta California Newspaper

San Francisco, November 15th, 1860

Who is Samuel Blackwood - Chapter I

Between 1850 and 1859, an enigmatic drifter named Samuel "Hellfire" Blackwood roamed the high desert plains and mountains of the untamed American West. Despite his solitary ways, he amassed an impressive mythology that both preceded and followed his random appearances in various towns and cities. Everyone seemed to know what he looked like, but no one could agree on who he was or where he came from.

He was according to all recollections, tall, dark, and dangerous. His age appeared to be somewhere in the late thirties, to mid-forties. He had an olive complexion, long black hair, blue eyes, and a tall physique. Given his complexion and long hair, most folks figured he was of mixed blood, perhaps half Indian and half English or French. Most reckoned his Indian side came from the Crow, Cheyenne, or Blackfoot tribes, but I cannot as of yet confirm this.

Interestingly, the dangerousness attributed to him was not in the body count he amassed along the way (as far as I've found, he hasn't killed anyone) but in his demeanor. Meaning, that he looked every bit the part of a gunslinger who would just as soon shoot you then have to deal with you. More than one eyewitness who has claimed to have seen him up close and personal all say he has 'dead blue' eyes.

He was a lone stranger with an even stranger past with an uncanny knack for appearing at just the right time and place to effect change. How he did it or knew where to show up when he did, was part of the growing mythos surrounding the man. Those who met him swore on all that was holy that the rumors did him no justice; they claim he appeared as a man cursed by immortality but touched with a divine sense of destiny.

Rumors were aplenty about this nomadic prophet. Some said he used to be a notorious cold-blooded killer for hire during the lawless gold rush days in California. Others added that he had experienced a radical spiritual transformation akin to Saul's conversion to the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. But this current rendition of the "prophet" was only the most rendition of his story. Some claim he has been wandering these hills for centuries.

Along the way, I've even heard tales from the natives of the Ute, Sioux, and Crow tribes, who all knew of Samuel "Hellfire" Blackwood. They called him the "White Wanderer" and the "Old Man in the Woods." Tribal elders would recount tales passed down from their great-grandparents of a dangerous, tall white man stalking the woods of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Some warriors, eager to test their mettle against him, set out to find him to kill him but were never seen again.

Given the longevity of his lore, which if what the natives said were true, would mean he had been haunting these lands before the country had become a nation. Some are now saying he is the fabled Count of Saint Germain, who, according to legend, was actually Cartaphilus *the*

Wandering Jew. As the legend has it, Cartaphilus was Pontius Pilate's doorkeeper and struck Jesus on his way to Calvary, telling him to move faster. Jesus replied, "I go, and you will wait till I return," thus cursing Cartaphilus to walk the earth until the end of the age. The legend continues that Cartaphilus eventually converted to Christianity, was baptized, changed his name to Joseph, and lived piously amongst the emerging Christian communities.

Of course, if you're immortal, you tend to outlive those communities and eventually the empire. By the fourth century Anno Domini, Joseph moved north into Europe, living among the various Germanic, Gallic, and other barbarian tribes. History loses track of him from there until the 12th century when he supposedly reappears in Armenia, claiming to be Cartaphilus. Fluent in dozens of languages, he spoke of history not as one who learned it from books, but as one who lived to see it.

The legend continues that he later appeared to have come over with Sir Walter Raleigh to help establish the first English colony of Jamestown at Roanoke in 1585. He remained behind when Raleigh left for England in 1587 to get supplies. He also seems to have disappeared with the rest of the colony by the time Raleigh returned in 1590 only to find the settlement deserted, devoid of any colonists, or hints as to their whereabouts.

By the mid-1600s, Cartaphilus began appearing in various European courts and aristocratic circles as Count of Saint Germain. He wowed audiences with his charm, historical insight, and fluency. He was also known to be a master alchemist who could change base metals into gold and fix precious stones, removing any imperfections. Now, here in the 1850s, he appeared as this mysterious gunslinging prophet who wandered the American West.

Eyewitnesses claim Sam had 'special powers'—that he could either heal the dead or dying or show them the fiery depths of hell by a mere touch. This is in part how he came to be known as the Outlaw Prophet. Either you were gonna get healed and get saved, or get the hell scared out of you and get saved. If you'd asked me, there was more Elijah the Prophet than Paul the Apostle in his style.

As a seasoned writer and reporter with *The Californian* in San Francisco, I've heard all manner of tall tales. To be sure, I thought this was no different. The first time I heard of him was through someone who claimed to have been healed by him. At first, I was certain this was just some snake-oil salesman who was taking credit for someone already on the mend, but then I heard another story, and another, all from folks heading west to California who had run into him along the way.

What really struck me was the different circumstances by which all of these eyewitnesses were healed. From cave-ins at coal mines to gunshot wounds and snake bites, this "White Wanderer" seemed to be able to heal all manner of infirmities. This is where I also heard tell of his "hellfire" touch, which is how he got that nickname. It seemed other groups tried to thwart him only to come on the receiving end of that touch. By late 1858, I got interested. I had heard enough, and my curiosity got the better of me. I put the request in with the newspaper to pursue this as a *special interest* story, put my affairs in order with the newspaper (and my landlady), and got on the road to track this fella down.

Whoever he truly was and whatever he was truly up to, his mission now clearly entailed moving eastward. Over the next two months, I chased him through mining towns, cow towns, ghost towns, and over much perilous terrain. I'd endured all manner of weather, and been chased by banditos and Indians, bears, mountain lions, and the rest of nature it seemed. If his path was anything like mine, Samuel's path was one of a crucible mixed between redemption and ruin. Every town had a story about him and the further I dug, the more I began to question myself as if I were chasing a man or myth. To be certain, the thing I was most terrified about was not the aforementioned perils, but that I would finally catch up to this mysterious stranger only to be disappointed that the reality didn't live up to the sensationalism.

However, in the spring of 1859, on the border between the American West and the Great Plains, I finally caught up with the enigmatic stranger. He had made a makeshift camp on the leeward side of the Rocky Mountains. His pale gray horse, Jake, I've heard him called by the many, grazed in the sparing vegetation untethered and unconcerned at my approach. As I rode up, I found him sitting at a decent-sized campfire with his back to me. He appeared to be staring out over the vast plains of grass that stretched on before us like a prairie ocean, transfixed on the prairie ocean bordering somewhere between the mortal bounds of earth and the eternal realm of the wide-open skies.

My mission was this; confirm or put to bed the rumor of who he is and find out if this *Outlaw Prophet* was the real deal or just another 'false prophet' peddling smelly elixirs and false hopes. What I knew then was he could have cared less. What I couldn't have known then was that by this time next year, our nation would be on the cusp of war. Nor did I understand the mission he was on, which was to deliver an urgent message to a young lawyer and aspiring politician in Illinois. The mission was a message, and that message was—*hold the country together at all costs*. Again, this was last year. Here is our story.

to be continued...

Horace Finch

The *Californian*

November 15th, 1860

Chapter II

April 3rd, 1859

I made my way down the steep mountain path, slowly guiding my horse to keep slow so as not to lose control. It was late in the afternoon, and it would be dark soon as the sun set behind the Rockies. Already on my second day on the leeward side of the mountains was when I saw the smoke rising from a campsite.

As I rode up closer, I saw him, sitting with his back to me still wearing that strangely familiar red duster. He wasn't wearing a hat, and his dark hair fell over the shoulders of the jacket like a mane, and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, this was in fact, the man I had been chasing. His gray horse, Jake, also seemed disinterested in my approach and continued to graze on any available vegetation he could find.

But as came into speaking distance, I announced myself intentionally and early so as not to be on the receiving end of any potential violence he might be justified in carrying out.

"Hello there!" I said at the top of my voice just a few octaves below a yell.

Jake looked up momentarily, but Mr. Blackwood did not acknowledge.

"Again, hello sir! My name is Horace Finch, and I'm a reporter with the *Daily Alta California* newspaper out of San Francisco. Might I trouble you for an interview and perhaps more than a little bit of time?"

"Time is all I got," he said as his voice boomed out without turning around.

This was already becoming interesting. There was a drawl to his voice that sounded western, but had a hint of English, French, and German mixed in...a very odd combination. This certainly feeds into the mythos of his being the immortal polyglot Cartaphilus.

"Thank you, kind sir, as I said, my name is Horace Finch, and I'm a reporter. Been hearing all manner of tales surrounding your travels eastward."

"So, you're here to see if'n I'm the real deal, or some sideshow phony?"

"Yes, and yes, as it were," I replied as I tied up my horse and began walking around to sit opposite Samuel who was sitting on the ground, leaning against a log with his legs kicked out in front of him.

"Where to begin," Samuel mused as he bit off a bit of jerky. "You'll need more than a bit of time to get all this," he said as he displayed his hands palms upward as to indicate the whole of him.

"Well sir," I said, "as much time as it takes, I reckon."

“Pull up a chair,” he mused again. “Won’t be the first time I’ve had to tell folk who I am and where I’m from. The telling ain’t the hard part, it’s the believing.”

“Well Mr. Blackwood, I’ve been following you for the past two months, and at this point, I’m ready to be a believer,” I replied with perhaps more desperation than I was comfortable with admitting. I sheepishly pulled my journal out of my satchel to mask the awkwardness.

“You don’t have to believe me, Mr. Finch. I’m just a man,” he replied still not having even looked up to acknowledge me.

“What I meant to say, was that I’m ready to tell your story, so long as it’s based in facts and not fantasy. To be truthful, I’ve heard so much about you I don’t know which is which anymore.”

He looked up and for the first time our eyes met, and every description of the ‘dead blue’ eyes rang true. There was a paleness to them that seemed preternatural, especially against his complexion.

“I’m supposing you want to know if I’m the *Wandering Jew*,” he asked.

“That’s as good a place to start as any,” I replied.

“Well,” he said slowly in his strangely cadenced drawl, “I am.”

Over the next four hours, dusk became night and the fire continued to burn heartily without him so much as stoking it or adding any logs to it. I’d made myself comfortable, presuming I would be spending the night there (as there was no other proper lodging in the vicinity). I drank water and sipped sparingly from a small whisky flask I kept to ward off the mountain chill.

Samuel sat, unmoving throughout the entire time, and would occasionally take a bite of jerky as he recalled his time on earth from serving under Pontius Pilate and his encounter with Jesus Christ, to his conversion to Christianity and service in the Byzantine Empire. He spoke about his times amongst the barbarian tribes of the Goths, Visigoths, Vandals, Huns, Franks, and Anglo-Saxons.

He claims to have witnessed the rise of Islam and watched the conquest of the largely pagan Arabia, converting by the sword, all those pagans to the brutal hand of Islam. He recounted in painstaking detail, his most recent escapades in the company of various European royalty from the English *mad king* George III to the French Napoleon Bonaparte, to the Prussian King Frederick William III, to the Russian Tsar Nicholas I. By this point, even my veteran writing hand had begun cramping due to the extensive notetaking. He noticed my growing discomfort and offered to pause for a bit.

“How is this possible?” I asked. “I mean, I ain’t a preacher but how does the curse of immortality square with Scripture? Doesn’t it say in the Good Book that all men are appointed unto death, and then judgment?”

“Yes, it does. In Hebrews 9:27 it says *and as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment*. The way I understand it, is there are absolute truths, and there are general truths. When Jesus said *I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no man comes unto the Father but by me*, He was stating an absolute truth. But there are at least two instances in the bible where men haven’t died, that being Enoch and Elijah. Also, there are those who died, and were resurrected, and then died again later on, such as Lazarus and Eutychus. This is a general truth.”

“So, which do you figure into? The truth, or the exception to the truth?”

“I reckon, given how long I been here already, I’m in the exception category. But I’ve already been told when and how I was gonna die,” he said with a hint of sullenness to his tone.

“Well, you’ll certainly beat out Methuselah for the longest life lived,” I said, secretly proud that I could recall the man’s name from my time spent in church as a child. “Given your generosity with your time tonight, I’m assuming I’m not the first person you’ve had to explain your history too?”

“No, about every fifty years or so someone gets curious. The problem with immortality is that everything falls apart and records get lost, and cities fall to ruin, and things get lost. As for the barbarians, they never cared about preserving their prosperity. They don’t care about history or the future. They only care about surviving in the moment.”

“Probably much the same with the native tribes here,” I added.

“I reckon so. They’re mostly afraid of me, so I don’t interact a lot with them.”

“Rumor has it, that every so often, a young warrior will come and test his mettle against you, and then is never seen again. Is that true?”

“Yes. Then I show them if they don’t change their ways, where they are headed.”

“Ahh...the hellfire touch.”

He looked up at me at that moment as if he could sense the hint of skepticism in my tone.

“You don’t believe?” He asked.

“Well, you know, I hadn’t gone to church much in recent years. But I was steeped in it as a youth.”

“I didn’t ask you about church. I asked if you believe in heaven and hell?” He queried again...this time, more intentionally.

“I think twenty years spent in journalism (*hard to believe it’s been that long*) has left me jaded. I mean, the wars, Indian raids, slavery, political corruption, the crime during the Gold

Rush years. I don't know what I believe anymore," I replied truthfully but now feeling more vulnerable than I cared to be."

"So, if you're not a believer, then what are you doing chasing me down?" he asked, still piercing me with those unsettling blue eyes.

"To be honest, I was intrigued. But all the same, it's your word versus the truth. I mean, let's be honest, it's not like you can prove you've been around since the first century...but the hellfire touch...that would be something you could validate."

"You don't want me to validate your beliefs by the touch, trust me. It would be better for you to accept that God is real, heaven and hell are real, and that the only way to avoid hell is thru Jesus Christ."

"I am a grown man and can handle..." those words hadn't even finished coming out of my mouth before he was on his feet and squaring off with me faster than a rattlesnake strikes at an unwitting traveler startling me something fierce.

"Stand up then and take your medicine."

Seeking to deescalate the situation, I stood up slowly. My back and knees have been aching from riding for two months straight and now having sat on the cold hard ground for four plus hours.

"Are you ready?" he asked as he walked around the fire towards me.

It was at that moment that I could fully appreciate the general sentiment of his "dangerousness" appeal. Not only was he much larger than I (something you don't fully appreciate while sitting), but his quickness was unnerving. He also appeared genuinely fearful of what was to come, which made me even more fearful. But then again, I'd asked for it.

"Mr. Horace Finch, just remember, it will feel like eternity, but in reality, only a few seconds will have passed," he said lifting his head in prayer and touching my forehead simultaneously.

(Editors' note: I've known Horace Finch for most of those twenty years he's been writing here in San Francisco. I can attest to the fact he is one of the most honest men I've ever worked with.)

The moment his fingers grazed my forehead, a rush of dizziness threw me back as if I'd been shoved off a cliff. Plummeting, I clawed desperately for purchase, finding nothing to grasp. Time lost all meaning as I hurtled through the void, resigned to an endless fall until, with a jarring thud, I slammed into solid ground.

Even before I opened my eyes, the heat and stench assaulted me—sulfur and smoke choking the air, triggering violent dry heaves that wracked my ribs. Gradually, the gagging subsided, allowing me to blink open heavy lids. My eyes were of no avail, as darkness, thick as molasses, enveloped me, its oppressive weight pressing in on me like the walls of a volcanic cavern.

The searing heat made any attempt at comfort futile, scorching my skin as I tentatively felt the cracked, blistered ground beneath me. Lost and disoriented, I groped forward, unsure of where—or what—lay ahead. Guided by instinct or desperation, I stumbled onward, hands outstretched like a blind man in an alien labyrinth.

A sense of presence, unseen yet palpable, prickled my senses. My very thoughts, now audible, betrayed my last vestige of privacy and were now echoing through the abyss. Then, cutting through the suffocating silence, came a hyena like laughter—madness distilled, inhuman and hauntingly close.

Panic surged as I strained against the oppressive darkness to move away from the laughter, but I felt sluggish as if wading through tar. The laughter drew nearer, a malevolent force hurtling towards me like a charging Grizzly. Bound by unseen chains, I floundered, defenseless and helpless as the creature closed in.

Abruptly, it halted.

Terror renewed as its fetid breath washed over me, surpassing even the stench of sulfur. A low growl rumbled, and two fiery eyes fixated on me from the abyss, towering above like malevolent stars. A monstrous hand seized my shoulder, agony electrifying every nerve, driving me to my knees.

Through the pain, I grasped at fragmented memories—the Outlaw Prophet's warning of 'hellfire.' However, this was no hallucination; it was a harrowing reality. Had I let this stranger lead me to my end, forsaking all hope for a fleeting tale in tomorrow's news?

Panic drowned out reason as despair set in, my thoughts echoing in the cavernous void around me. A gaping maw stretched wide, teeth glinting in the darkness as another hand clamped onto my opposite shoulder, doubling the agony.

I screamed, primal and uncontrolled, knowing with chilling certainty that this infernal beast intended to devour me alive.

And then...

I woke up with a gasp.

Fresh air hit my lungs and the sound of nature awaking with the rising of the sun filled my ears. I opened my eyes thankful beyond all measure that I could see blue skies again. I sat up and looked around. Samuel Blackwood was gone. Finding myself alone and lying on the forest floor I rolled over and prayed. I thanked God at that moment for my life and begged for not only His forgiveness but pledged my undying loyalty to Jesus for the rest of my life. I never wanted to go back to hell. Never ever. I wouldn't even wish that upon my worst enemies.

After praying, I got up and kicked dirt onto the dying embers. Even looking at their orange-reddish glow reminded me of that thing's eyes. I kicked even more dirt on them to ensure

they would go cold forever. I untied my horse and looked around for any sign of Samuel, but finding none, I looked out over the vast prairie land before me. He said he was heading east to Illinois, so I guess I'm heading east. I got a feeling this story is far from over.

...to be continued.

Chapter III

April 4th, 1859

I stood there for five minutes, staring out over the prairie, trying to make sense of the whole thing. I'd put my right hand on a stack of Bibles and swear I spent a good eight hours listening to the entire story from a man who claims to have been walking the earth since Jesus was last here, but my human mind still couldn't reconcile it. I got on my horse and began heading downhill to move eastward.

As I rode, the vastness of the plains stretched out before me, a boundless sea of grass under an endless sky. Samuel had a head start, no doubt about it, but I figured I'd catch up to him soon enough. The plains were massive, and it would take at least 3-4 weeks to cross with nothing but you, your horse, and the open sky. I hoped the weather would stay clear because being caught out here in a storm was no kind of fun. Moreover, I hoped to steer clear of Indians and bandits as well, because they weren't any kind of fun either.

By the second day, I figured I would have caught up to him, but I saw nothing ahead of me but miles and miles of open prairie. I thought perhaps I should extend my daily trek a little further and longer on the next day, to cut down the distance between us as I didn't seem to be gaining any ground on Samuel. Either he was traveling at a gallop all day or had some other means of moving that I didn't understand. My food was scarce again, but I was able to wrangle up a corn snake and a rabbit. Skinned them, cooked, and ate the rabbit later that night, but will let the snake meat dry out into jerky. A nasty squall was forming up behind me and looked to overtake me, but it never came. It seemed to move more southeast than east, and thankfully, I didn't have to travel in soaked clothes.

I pressed on, my mind wrestling with the weight of Samuel's words. I used the evenings to read over my notes and clarify anything I couldn't make out from my scrawl. Thinking back to the conversation, and amazingly, was able to recollect the details I had forgotten to write down. I began replaying all the first-hand accounts he told me. The way he told the stories wasn't like he had heard or read about them, but how he had lived them. He described the whole trial there with Jesus and how badly beaten He had been when He was brought before Pilate. He almost pitied Him.

Yet, he said, the moment he shoved Him, and Jesus responded to him about being here till He returns, Samuel hauntingly described that look in His eyes. Samuel said His eyes pierced through him like an arrow through a heart, down to his very soul and he nearly collapsed at the

weight of that encounter. For a split second, he said, he knew that this Man was really God in the flesh. Reflecting on that encounter, he wondered how the Pharisees and the rest of the Sanhedrin could put Him under trial for false charges. He wondered how any of those men could strike Jesus with those eyes. He wondered how the Roman soldiers who were beating Him, could do so. One look from Jesus leveled him, and yet these men were lying about Him to His face, spitting on him, hitting Him with their fists, and later, hitting Him with far more devastating weapons of cruelty.

I couldn't even imagine a scene like that, or what I would be doing at that moment. Would I have been one of Jesus' followers? Would I have been one of the Roman soldiers or a member of the Sanhedrin accusing and hitting Jesus? Or would I have just been some nameless face in the crowd mocking him before moving on with my normal day?

It was clear to Samuel that his mission was divine, no question and the path he had walked was fraught with peril. He told me of the various enemies he began to accumulate in each age and empire he moved amongst. From various Roman bureaucrats to certain barbarian warlords, to more than a few Moslem caliphs, far eastern emperors and, as of late, these Latter-Day Saints as they call themselves. They had even put a bounty on his head, claiming he blasphemed their esteemed prophet, the late Joseph Smith in some altercation back east. He didn't go into what happened specifically, but clearly, they did not like him and thought he should be silenced forever.

I got moving out early on that third morning. The problem with all of Samuel's stories, was I have an active imagination, and I would imagine myself there with him. The next thing I knew, I'd have been riding for several hours lost in these daydreams, not paying attention to my surroundings. While traveling on the plains can be exceedingly monotonous, they can also be every bit as dangerous as in the forest. Twice I had to hide in ravines so as not to be seen by some passing Indian hunting parties. Thankfully I had awakened from my daydreaming to see them from a distance before they saw me. I couldn't tell which tribes they were from, but given I was in Kansas-territory, I figured either Cheyenne or Pawnee. I dared not to get much closer, so I waited until they moved on. I figured Mr. Blackwood didn't have that same problem, although he did tell me about one such run-in with some natives back West.

He had been talking about riding through the Montana territory some years back and how some Crow warriors had set upon him. He fought off several but continued riding out into an open area, and saw more Crow ahead of him trying to cut his escape off. He said his horse Jake turned to cross the stream and as they did, the water splashing up behind them turned into crows and flew at the riders chasing him. After that, the Indians quit chasing him and his mythos amongst the natives grew and they began avoiding him at all costs. However, in the here and now, I would do my best to avoid any buffalo herds since they attracted the natives and I would be an easy target to add to their scalp collection.

The nights began to grow a little warmer and I came across the first real evidence of Mr. Blackwood's journey east; the remains of a still-smoldering campfire. Granted, it was just a campfire, but it looked, by the human traces, to be of a single man and a horse. I hadn't passed anyone moving West, so it had to be Mr. Blackwood's. Or at least I strongly hoped as such.

Another day of open prairie. The terrain was changing, as he began to notice the rolling hills were replacing the pancake flat prairies further west. I was thinking back to the last thing he told me about, which was the man whom he sought out in Illinois. A man named Abraham Lincoln. At the time, I had no idea who he was, but now, he is apparently, the leading candidate for the new Republican party, which is the ‘anti-slavery’ party. He also told me our nation was heading for a terrible time of blood and violence and that the nation would never be the same. I wasn’t sure what to think about all that, but in the ensuing months since our last encounter, and given the increasing political polarization of the nation, I’m beginning to sense the gravitas of Samuel's message he carried.

But with each step my horse took, I knew I was drawing closer to this enigmatic man. I also felt the pull of destiny, a force guiding me toward a reckoning that would change the course of history forever. The journey was long, the dangers real, but I knew I had to see it through. Samuel Blackfoot's tale was one of redemption and ruin, a testament to the power of faith and the unyielding will of the divine. And as the sun set on the horizon, I rode on, like him, a lone rider in a vast wilderness, carrying with me the weight of his prophetic warning and the hope of a nation.

Chapter IV

April 8th, 1859

Although I had been singularly focused on catching up and joining Mr. Blackwood’s prophetic mission, he hadn’t invited me, and I hadn’t asked. Likely, he may not want me to accompany him, thus, I suspected I might have to hang back and watch things from afar. The day after my last entry into my journal, I came across a small group of settlers (two families) who had been set upon by bandits. Aside from the initial robbery and being roughed up, they were somehow able to fend off the more serious threats of having their womenfolk violated or worse, killed.

As it were, a stranger came across their dilemma before things went from bad to worse and began severely thrashing the bandits (all six of them). Clearly, Mr. Blackwood had been here and done another *Good Samaritan* deed before moving on unceremoniously. According to the settlers, this stranger was a tall man with long black hair who had come out of nowhere to their aid. As soon as the would-be attack was over, the *terrified* bandits left. The settlers emphasized the word “terrified” with animated wide-eyed, mouth-agape expressions. It appears that in the process of the skirmish, Samuel had given generous helpings of the *hellfire touch* to them, to which, these ne'er-do-wells lit out and never looked back. According to the settlers, as soon as the bandits were gone, so too was that mysterious stranger.

I told them who the mysterious stranger was, and although I didn’t go into all his backstory, I figured this would just be another notch in the belt of Mr. Blackwood’s growing mythos. I was able to help with getting their wounded bandaged up and setting their wagons back into somewhat working order. I warned them of the Indian tribes I’d come across on my

journey east and recommended that they head back to Kansas City to hire some gunmen before heading back west. I left them there in the Flint Hills as they began to deliberate on what path they should take. As good as this was to help, it would set me back a full day which I would have to make up for in the days ahead.

I began to make my way towards Kansas City. I reckoned I wasn't but forty miles or so, and I could resupply myself there and see if Mr. Blackwood had stopped, and to which direction (east, northeast, or north) he had set out upon. This was somewhat of a gamble, given he didn't need to eat, sleep, and do the things the rest of us mortal men had to do. This is what made tracking him by evidentiary things like campfires and such, hard to track. However, the real evidence was mostly found in his interactions with people. Nevertheless, I wasn't sure if this excursion would waste time or aid in helping me catch up to this enigmatic stranger.

In 1859, Kansas City was a thriving hub of commerce and cattle. With four saloons with rooms to let, two dry general goods stores, an iron smithy, a barber, a church, and plenty of cattle bins, Kansas City was an island of humanity in a sea of open plains. Finding Samuel in a place like this might prove difficult, but not impossible. To my surprise, it looked like a twister hit the place shortly before I arrived. Moving through, the locals were generous enough to cast me a wary eye as they continued picking up pieces of wood, wagon wheels, and various other materials that lay scattered across the thoroughfare.

Getting off my horse and tying him up to a post, I sauntered over to one, visibly disgruntled store owner, and wiped the sweat from my brow.

"Say pardner, what happened?" I asked sheepishly, not wishing to add fuel to his already foul-looking demeanor.

"What do you think? Was a full-blown shoot out and I don't know what're to call it. Like magic and chaos had a baby and out came this dark stranger shooting fire from his hands."

"Come again?" I asked. "You mean, like a wizard or something?"

"I reckon. Never seen anything like it," he replied, never breaking a stride in loading the wagon with debris.

My mouth forgot to shut.

"What caused it? I mean, did he just ride into town with hands-a-blazing, or was there some kind of provocation that caused it?"

"Well, I didn't see the beginnings of it, but from my store (he said pointing in a direction behind him) we heard the ruckus of the mob coming out to meet him.

"Mob of who?" I asked.

“Them heretical Mormons over yonder,” he said pointing down the street and spat loudly as if spitting out the saliva that carried the words to his mouth might exorcise his body.

“Oh, I see,” I said as I reflected on the bounty they put on his head sometime back. I pulled out my map and saw that Navoo was the old Latter-Day Saint enclave not too far from here.

“How could they know he would be here?” I asked, more to myself than the store owner.

“I don’t know if they knew he would be here. More like happenstance, I suppose. Kansas City is a major thoroughfare to the West. Last major city this side of the Rockies.”

“Yeah, and they would have been heading west to Utah-territory,” I said still trying to take in all the damage. “But a mob?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they saw him, and it was one of those *targets of opportunity* moments.”

“That would make the most sense. Given the bounty the Mormons have put on his head, that would have made them heroes by the time they showed up to Utah territory,” I added.

“Yessir, ’ didn’t work out quite like they expected I suspect,” he said in his dry-midwestern sarcasm.

With that, I turned back and unhitched my horse, and continued on my way. A little further down the street, I saw about a dozen Mormon men, who were alive but looked worse for wear, being attended to by their women. Most had dazed looks in their eyes, clothes shredded, and bleeding from various parts of their bodies. I wanted to keep riding, but my journalistic nature got the better of me and I stopped to ask them what happened.

“Howdy folk. My name is Horace Finch, and I’m a reporter for *The Californian* newspaper out of San Francisco. Can you tell me what happened?”

“It was that outlaw heretic,” the man sitting on the ground managed to say while still wiping the blood from his bloody mouth.

“So he just came up and attacked you fine folk?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Well, you see, we saw him and knew he had a bounty on his head. We thought we would cash in on that.”

Looking around, he counted about 15 men in varied states of hurt. He had learned to sketch back in California to help aid his memory when recalling stories, he had covered. His hand furiously recreating the scene in a rudimentary fashion.

“That man’s possessed by the devil hisself,” a female voice rang out from behind me.

“Did he show you hell?” I asked, turning to see a Saloon Girl with a surprised look on her face.

“You’ve seen it haven’t you?” she asked.

“I have. A couple of weeks back, I asked him to show me if the rumors were true.”

She looked visibly shaken. Like she’d woken up from a nightmare. The Mormon men started to get up slowly and coalesce around me and the Saloon Girl.

“We seen it too,” four of them chimed out in almost perfect unison.

“Shop owner down the street said he saw lightning shoot out of his hands. Can you corroborate that claim?”

“Ol Jedidiah over yonder pulled a rifle on him after he put the beating on five of the brethren,” one of the bruised and battered Mormon settlers said as he pointed toward a man still lying in the street. “As soon as he brought his long iron up, that Samuel fella done spun around and did some wizardry and shot lightning from his fingertips.”

This was a new claim I hadn’t come across out West, nor had the man himself (as the Saloon lady would say) decided to divulge that information when we sat around the campfire not too long ago.

“He’s got the devil in him,” the Saloon lady reiterated.

“No, quite the contrary,” I said. “He says he’s on a mission from God.”

“Beating up the brethren is a mission of the divine?” one of the Mormon settlers asked.

“I could be wrong, but I don’t think this would have happened had you not tried to collect the bounty on his head by way of the mob.”

“He claimed Joseph Smith was a fraud, and that we were all being deceived. That is blasphemy!” Quickly recalling their lingering sensitivity about Joseph Smith's death and the Nauvoo uprising a few years back, I noticed their rising anger as the cheeks of those around him flushed a deeper red.

They may have been afraid of Mr. Blackwood now, but I was an easy target they could take their frustrations out on. I started to inch my way back out of the center of the circle of men who had slowly made their way around me.

“Look,” I said cautiously as I put my empty hands up slowly, “I ain’t looking for trouble. I’m just a reporter trying to see what is fact and what is fiction. I ain’t defending the man,” (as he clearly demonstrated he could do). “I will say this though, you got that fella all wrong.”

“How’s that?” one of the brawnier settlers said as he stared at me unblinkingly out of his non-blackened and swollen eye.

“Well, y’all know him as Samuel Blackwood, some drifter prophet. But his real name is Cartaphilus, the man who served Pontius Pilate and helped crucify Jesus.”

“That would make him,” one of the settlers said counting on his fingers while the others turned to look at him, “dang near’ eighteen hundred and fifty years old,” he said proudly to the group.

While they were looking at the man counting, I was nearly to my horse when I heard them turn back to see I was gone. Several of them started to chase after me but their wives came out of nowhere and shut that down quickly. Although I could no longer hear what they were saying out of the sound of my horses galloping hooves, I like to think their hitting their husbands with brooms was the equivalent of, “*You idiots, hadn’t you learned your lesson already!*”

Horace Finch

Chapter V

April 15th, 1858

A week out of Kansas City and my near miss with an angry mob, I haven’t heard hide nor hair of Mr. Samuel Blackwood. No campfires. No stories. No rescued settlers. Nothing. It’s as if on the way to Springfield, he up and disappeared from human history again.

Well, not really.

If Samuel, or Cartaphilus, whichever you prefer, could shoot lightning from his fingertips, I’m assuming he could probably fly or magically appear wherever he wanted. Whelp, add lightning bolts to the long list of fantastical things he never told me he could do.

But what was even more curious was his sudden disappearance when he’s so close to his mission. I think it odd, given his vast public appearances over the last ten years, or hundreds of years if you ask the natives, for him to suddenly go dark.

According to my map, Springfield, Illinois was about a four-day ride from KC. I had intended on changing horses at the last stop, but seeing as the hospitality was less than appealing, I never got the opportunity. I decided, given the lack of signs, to head on to Springfield and go to the one place I know he’ll turn up...at Abraham Lincoln’s home.

Springfield, Illinois was far more cosmopolitan than Kansas City, but not as much as San Francisco. Still, it was bustling with commerce in all directions. But as nice as it was to be back in civilization, that made finding this young Lincoln all the more challenging. After a few hours

of chasing down false leads, I finally came into a dry goods store to ask the clerk if he knew of this young man.

“Excuse me good sir, would you perhaps know of an Abraham Lincoln?” I asked.

“I should know him,” he replied curiously.

“That’s great. Do you know where I might find him?”

“Of course, I know where he is,” he replied leaning on his broom.

“Are you him?” I asked sheepishly as he stood upright to an impressive height.

“I am Abraham Lincoln. Who’s asking?”

“Mr. Lincoln, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said reaching for his hand. “My name is Horace Finch, with *The Californian* newspaper out of San Francisco.”

“Why would a Californian newspaper want to cover a political event in Illinois?”

“I understood you to be a lawyer, not a store clerk,” I asked.

“I am a lawyer, but I get free room and board here at my old job, but I still help out in the evenings for the hospitality.”

“In all fairness, my interests here for the paper are not necessarily you, but someone who is on his way to meet you.”

“That sounds interesting,” Abraham said leaning in again. “Who is this fella?”

“Oh, yeah, it will be very interesting,” I said probably a little too enthusiastically. “His name is Samuel Blackwood, and he is a prophet.”

“Oh, is this suppose to be a hit piece to tarnish my reputation as a Republican candidate?” he asked, perplexed.

“Nothing like that I assure you. Mr. Blackwood is our paper’s *person of interest*. Been following him around the West for a good bit now, and his feats are alive in this evolving legend. I didn’t know his mission was to talk to you until my last meeting with him in Colorado.”

Author’s note: *The following contains the firsthand accounts of Mr. Blackwood, in his own tongue, which was relayed to me after the fact regarding his whereabouts between Kansas City and Springfield when he went missing.*

At the same time, nearly four miles east of Springfield in a thicket of woods, lay a motionless Samuel Blackwood on the ground. Around him stood three darkened figures who were not but red eyes and humanoid shapes but faced outward as if guarding a prize.

“We know who you are *Cartaphilus the cursed*,” one of the shadows hissed.

“Quite the demonstration you put on back there in Kansas City,” another shadow added. “We’d thought we lost you, but you couldn’t resist using your powers?”

“Matter’s not,” the final shadow said in a deep growl, “our job is to keep him from his final mission or else.”

Feigning unconsciousness, Cartaphilus awoke but remained motionless, eyes shut. He couldn't move his fingers or wiggle his toes. It seemed his captors had cast a form of sleep paralysis on him, hoping to freeze him in a state of terror. But who would dare to thwart his mission? Satan, undoubtedly. Yet the Prince of Darkness was too entangled in the Old World's affairs to concern himself with a nobody from the New World. Unless this nobody was destined to become someone of great importance, and Satan had gotten wind of it.

But no, he had already been told what was to come. This man would be the next president of the United States, and Cartaphilus mission was to keep the union together at all costs. But who were these shadowy fiends? No mere mortal could bring him down so swiftly. Who had hired them? Would they answer his questions? Given their penchant for inflicting pain, direct dialogue seemed unwise. As long as they believed he was unconscious, they might inadvertently reveal the answers he sought.

"The master has seen fit that this nation should not survive," one of the shadowy fiends said proudly.

"All it needs is a little nudge." At the word "nudge," the trio burst into laughter.

Cartaphilus lay there, motionless, suppressing his urge to strike them down. They knew who he was and had some inkling of his mission, but they didn't know everything. He deduced they weren't fallen angels, as they couldn't physically manifest as humans. They weren't Nephilim either, confined to physical forms like giants. These were something else—perhaps disembodied spirits of malevolent beings from ages past. His patience wearing thin, he waited until they were engrossed in discussing the impending bloodshed before making his move.

He tried to say, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, I command you to dissipate and leave these lands!" but no sound came out. The paralysis included his vocal cords. Summoning all his mental strength, he thought the words with such fierce intensity that the words appeared audible even without moving his mouth, causing all three to clutch their ears and shriek in pain at the name of Jesus. Sensing the paralysis lift, he rose to his full height, invoking Jesus' name to drive them back to which they gave into full retreat as their screams grew louder. They should have known better than to attack one appointed by God.

Not knowing how long he'd been there, but sensing he was already late, he surveyed the place one last time. How had they managed to ambush him? One mentioned they were drawn to the power he'd used against the Mormon mob. But he'd used his powers many times before without attracting extra attention. Why was this time different? Pondering this, he picked up his hat and revolver, wiping off the dust. Stepping toward Springfield a portal materialized before him.

This wasn't the first time for this to happen. Usually, this was a quick update from on high, but the portal remained eerily opaque with no clue as to what lay on the other side. Stepping forward in faith, to his shock, he found himself no longer in Illinois, but at Satan's throne in ancient Pergamum (now in the heart of the Ottoman Turk's Asia Minor). To be continued...

Chapter Part VI

Author's note: *The following continues the firsthand accounts of Mr. Blackwood, in his own tongue, which was relayed to me after the fact regarding his whereabouts between Kansas City and Springfield when he went missing.*

Perched high upon a windswept mountain along the Turkish coast, the ruins of ancient Pergamon gaze proudly—almost defiantly—over the azure Aegean Sea. While most of its splendid monuments lay in disarray and buried under millennia of dirt, grass, and rubble, the abandoned remains of the acropolis belie its former grandeur. He'd been here before shortly after his encounter with the condemned Christ. Back then, the Temple of Zeus stood proudly, a tribute to the greatest pagan god of the Greeks. Once a rival to Alexandria, Ephesus, and Antioch in culture and commerce, Pergamum was also renowned for its advancements in medicine, which continues to influence modern medical practices for centuries to follow.

In the years following his encounter with Jesus, and after escaping his indentured servitude under Pontius Pilate, Cartaphilus wandered far and wide, eventually making his way to these parts in search of the Apostle John. Word had it that John was in Mysia, tending to Jesus' earthly mother, Mary, and founding churches as he went. John had long since left, before Mary's passing and his exile to the island of Patmos by Emperor Domitian. Cartaphilus himself had ventured north, into the dense forests of Germania, seeking solitude with the Lord for many years.

It wasn't until nearly the middle of the second century that Cartaphilus journeyed back south. There, he encountered one of John's disciples, a man named Polycarp of Smyrna. Polycarp handed him a precious document—the Revelation of Jesus Christ, penned by John during his imprisonment on Patmos. It was here that he learned that Jesus called Pergamum, the place where Satan dwells and has his throne, which Cartaphilus found odd, considering how modern and culturally savvy the place had seemed. *It shouldn't be surprising* he remembered thinking. *Most folk think Satan lives and rules in the smoke-filled shadowy caverns of hell. Nope. Satan's*

got himself perched up on high, looking down on all the humans as if they were insects and he was their god. Looking at it now, time has not been kind to this place. As he walked, he surveyed the ruins and remnants of this once great city. That place had become so desolate, even the ghosts had abandoned it. So lost in thought and memory he'd become, he'd neglected to recognize the dark figure sitting on a fallen marble pillar off to his three 'o clock position watching him.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you," the figure said in Aramaic shocking Cartaphilus out of his nostalgia.

Turning and drawing his pistol faster than the blink of an eye, Cartaphilus faced the figure who now was coming off the pillar and slowly walking toward him out of the shadows.

"And you are?" Cartaphilus asked, realizing only after the words had come out that he'd responded likewise in Aramaic; a language he hadn't spoken in nearly nine centuries.

"You know who I am," the figure replied now in koine Greek.

"Your voice does sound familiar," Cartaphilus replied in Greek. "Why are you lingering in the shadows. Come forth, let me see your face."

The moon was full that night, and stepping forward, Cartaphilus noticeably recoiled when he saw Lucifer step out of the shadows into the moonlight.

Author's notes: Samuel... Cartaphilus confided in me after the fact all of these details as true. Upon asking him what Lucifer looked like, he gave a most curious description. He said he looked both incredibly beautiful and yet profoundly ruined at the same time.

"You haven't aged a day Cart...or should I call you by your preferred name now, Mr. Samuel Blackwood."

"I'd just assume you didn't come calling at all," Samuel replied holstering his pistol. Lead and iron wouldn't vanquish this kind of monster.

"Touché...Saint Germain."

Ol' Beelzebub was messing with his mind by using all of his previous alias and dialects.

"I reckon you're the one who put them goons on me and then opened the portal? What do you want from me?"

"I was hoping for your soul, but seeing that's off limits, perhaps just an answer to a question."

"I ain't got nothing for you Satan. You want answers, you know Who you have to ask," Samuel replied.

“I know I know. It’s much more delightful to get them the old fashioned way though.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t got anything for you.”

“Why does the Father have you passing messages to this young man in the New World?”

“What makes you think I got a mission?” Samuel asked.

“Unlike Him (referring to God) I can’t be everywhere at the same time. But I do have eyes and ears everywhere, and a little bird told me you’re on this mission to that young, eager, idealistic politician in Illinois. Who is he to you, or rather, Him (pointing upwards).”

He’d already been standing there for a few minutes dialoguing with Lucifer before realizing that the longer he stood here having the conversation, the more likely he was to spill the beans so to speak. He began running through the biblical rolodex his mind searching for that perfect verse.

“I can see the wheels in your mind turning. Which verse shall I use today? Look young Cartaphilus, you’re no Jesus and this isn’t the wilderness. Just shoot straight with me and you can be on your way. And mind you, I’ll know if you’re lying.”

At the word shoot, something animalistic or even primal rose up in him and his hands instinctively drew his pistols and unloaded twelve shots straight to the devil’s face. He didn’t know why he did it, but it felt better than standing there letting Satan mess with his mind.

The rounds hit Lucifer in the face but seemingly dissipated into his serpentine flesh. Still, the surprising violence of it provided the necessary split-second distraction Samuel needed to pray for another opening in which he stepped backward into leaving Satan standing there in a hazy cloud of gun smoke.

Author’s note: This is where Mr. Blackwood rejoins our venture in Springfield, appearing before both Mr. Lincoln and myself out of nowhere, and startling us like frightened polecats.

“Uhm... Mr. Abraham Lincoln, this is Mr. Samuel Blackwood,” I said unsure of what else to say in such alarming circumstances.

“Mr. Blackwood, I presume?” Abraham asked rising to meet this mysterious stranger. “Our mutual reporter friend here states you’re a prophet?”

“I am a prophet of the Lord,” Samuel replied shaking his hand.

“I have to be honest Mr. Blackwood, or Samuel if you prefer, I didn’t know what to make of Horace’s preliminary description of you or what you claim to be, until just now. You certainly know how to make an entrance.”

“He has that kind of effect on people,” I added still trying to get my nerves under control from his frightfully dramatic and preternatural entrance.

“Sorry about that Horace. I’ll have to fill you in after this on where I’ve been and who I’ve been with.”

“Horace says you got a message for me,” Abraham asked. “Might this be about my upcoming election?”

“Yes and no,” Samuel replied. “You will win the election, but I’m not sent here for that.”

“What is it then,” Abraham asked drawing up to Samuel and noticing they were roughly the same height. “Not a lot of tall men like us around these parts, it’s nice to look someone in the eyes without bending down.”

“Abraham, you might want to sit down for this part,” Samuel said.

Finding a wooden stool next to the counter, he sat down hesitantly before looking back at Samuel. “Good sir, I can handle the truth of whatever you have to say.”

“As I said, you’ll win the election. But in so doing, your victory will trigger a war, a civil war between the northern and southern states, that will be the bloodiest, most deadly conflict this nation has seen, or will ever see.”

Watching Abraham’s face as he received this news, it was like watching a man aged 20 years in just a few seconds. The weight of this information hit him like an avalanche.

Abraham sat silently for a few minutes taking in this weighty news and trying to process the gravity of it. “Is the war about slavery?” he asked.

“Yes. But the war was going to come anyway, either now, or in just a few short years. This is how it’s supposed to happen, and that is why I am here,” Samuel said reassuringly. “God has chosen you for this mission from even before the foundation of the world. You, Abraham Lincoln, are the man who will hold this nation together in its darkest hour.”

“I see,” Abraham said as if that was all he could muster.

It looked like Abraham was lost in thought somewhere deep in his mind. For my part, I sat there scribbling notes as furiously as I could take them. I also managed to get an outline of a sketch going trying my best to capture the moment, although I’d have to finish it later.

“Why me?” he asked inquisitively.

“I don’t know, I’m just the messenger. I reckon that information is between you and the Almighty. But what I do know is that there are forces, both seen and unseen, that will do anything to tear this nation apart. It’s as if they know something is coming down the pike, and

they need this country out of the way,” Samuel replied. “And if He’s chosen you, and He’s sent me here to forewarn you of the gravity of the situation, it must be a good reason.”

“Well, I thank you for bringing me this sobering news,” Abraham said politely as he stood up and walked over to get a drink of water.

“Mr. Lincoln,” Samuel said walking over to him, “I’ve been around for a very, very long time. Not sure all what Horace here has told you about me, but what I can say is, that God uses men like you at these pivotal points in human history to keep His divine agenda moving in the direction He wants it to go. This is a great honor you now possess. Embrace it and let the weight of it reinforce your commitment to keep this nation united no matter the cost, even when everyone around you tries to convince you otherwise, even to the last full measure of your devotion.”

“Mr. Blackwood, I’ve been in politics since the 1830s, and I’ve never felt surer in my convictions that slavery has become the great stain of injustice on our young nation. I don’t know how freed slaves fit into such a divided nation, or how even to cool the fiery flames of passion, rather than fan them, on so terrible a subject. I dread the thought that my victory, means the death of untold number of my countrymen. I haven’t even won, nor the war began, and I am already weary.”

“You’ve played coy with your faith all these years Mr. Lincoln, wondering whether religion is a virtue or a hindrance, politically speaking. It’s time to get off the fence and choose a side. You’ve seen the hand of God here with my arrival. I’ve seen the other side face to face, and I tell you as honestly as I’ve ever uttered, with God, all things are possible. He will give you the strength and courage you need to see this done. All you need do, is draw closer to Him.”

“I reckon so,” Abraham said.

“I reckon so as well,” Samuel said tipping his hat and walking out the door.

Quickly collecting my things and bidding Mr. Lincoln a rushed farewell, I headed out the door only to find Samuel was nowhere to be found.

Truly, a stranger in a strange land so far from where he began, it seemed only fitting that this mysterious Cartaphilus, St. Germain, or Samuel Blackwood if you prefer, could up and slip away as a phantom in the night. I found a boarding room there in Springfield and continued to refine and add to my tattered journal, doing my level best to recall things with as much clarity as human possible. One morning, I found several notes inserted into my journal, not in my handwriting, but clearly from Samuel detailing things I wasn't previously privy too. How he got in here or even thought to bring me the notes in the first place, heaven only knows. But he left no other clue as to where he was now.

Would anyone believe this fantastical story? I suppose we'll find out soon enough should Samuel's terrible predictions come true about what is to befall our great nation. I hope he is wrong, but I fear is right.

Two weeks later, I'm on a new horse riding out of Illinois and heading back into Kansas territory and I've not seen hide nor hair of Mr. Blackwood. I'd wanted to stay longer and cover more of Abraham Lincoln's rising political star there in Illinois, but my paper was threatening to cut off my funds if I didn't return post haste. They'd feared I'd just been galivanting around the country chasing phantoms and faeries.

Supposing their right in some regards, Mr. Blackwood was a phantom of sorts. He was a rumor, mysterious, yet strangely familiar. Someone known and unknown. He was a man of all ages, and also a man out of time. I don't know if or when he will resurface again. I'll just have to keep my ear to the ground and listen for the wild and unbelievable stories of a tall drifter, an outlaw if you prefer, making tall tales of his own amongst the wild and rugged people of the American west.

Respectfully,

Horace Finch

The Californian

April 30, 1858