

Purstmarch

1/15/2024

Alex Pasquale

Prologue: Purstmarch, Oregon 1849

Father John Hale's lantern cast a dull jaundice light across the trees, swinging rhythmically with the step of the horse under him. Rain streamed through the canopy of the evergreen forest, warping the light. Hale's shoulders rose in defense against the brisk October sea gales blowing through the trees. Hale gripped his weathered, leather-bound Bible close on his lap, his other hand wrapped taut around the reins of his Appaloosa. He pulled his wide-brimmed hat further over his head, trying to block the rain from assaulting his eyes. It didn't work.

Hale's eye caught an 'x' carved in a tree, and at least knew he was headed the right way. There was a warm glow now visible through the pines. He urged his black speckled horse forward and she plodded through the mud as quickly as she could. Emerging from the forest, Hale came upon the clearing that marked the end of his pilgrimage.

A large fire smoldered in the middle of the clearing with a large tarp raised over the fire to try and protect the ever-dwindling blaze. The Native American Coos sat around the pit, with skewered salmon roasting. The smell of burnt scales and fresh fish was made damp by the weather. A tall wooden effigy stood at the west, sea facing, head of the camp; a man holding two fish at his chest with a dog head topping the totem pole. Hale hopped down from his saddle into the mud, suddenly grateful that he brought heavier boots.

Hale's head snapped to the sound of a muffled crash. He saw a rectangular building. It had strong, amber cedar pillars holding up detachable walls, currently erected to stave off the rain and wind. This building was the largest in the camp and had a wooden bust of an eagle above the door. Hale pulled the leather covering the door aside and stepped into the building.

The building was really only one room. A fireplace sat at the opposite wall from Hale, the fire crackling and casting the room in an orange glow. The shadows of the five men and the table they all sat around danced across the floor by Hale's feet. The origin of the muffled crash was immediately apparent.

“How can you say that?!” shouted a man Hale knew well. Brother Elijah Livingstone’s usually cream-colored face was a bright red. His blonde hair was cut short. The fireplace flickered in his brown, widened eyes. The stool he had been sitting on was rolling haphazardly on the wooden floor.

“Please sit down,” said a muscular Native American. This was Chaytan, the Hawk of the Coos. He was dressed in colorful maroon and dandelion colored garments. He was a formidable hunter and warrior. He was currently the translator for the mission trip to this tribe. The man next to him, Chief Tyee, in an extravagant emerald green with bits of metal woven into his dress, maintained a dangerous eye contact with Brother Elijah, his broad jaw set. The other two missionaries, in plain black robes, sat next to Elijah with pale faces and eyes that didn’t focus on anything in particular. Elijah did not sit. Instead, he turned to Hale standing in the doorway. Elijah’s shoulders fell and a deep exhale followed.

“Thank our Lord in heaven that you’re here, Father John.”

“What’s going on?” Hale removed his hat and pushed back his thinning hair, flicking the water onto the rug at the entrance of the community house.

“We haven’t heard from Brother Zackary and Brother James in weeks” Elijah said, “I want to know where they could’ve gone.” Elijah turned back to Chaytan and Tyee.

Tyee spoke sternly, his deep voice filling the room, his dark eyes never wavering. Chaytan translated the Miluk, “There are people who go missing in the woods every month. It’s the toll we pay for living on her land. I am offended that your first thought was to blame us, when a bear or even a bad fall could be perfectly good explanations.”

“The toll we pay?” Elijah snapped, “They were last with your guide traveling north. That guide told us they’d be back by the end of last week. That doesn’t sound like nature taking its toll. That sounds like you taking advantage of our ignorance of these woods. It sounds like they were left for dead.”

“Brother.” Father Hale said. Elijah quieted. His face yelled for him however, still screaming that deep scarlet. Elijah picked up his cast aside stool and sat down. The other two missionaries in the room remained staring forward. They were against the far wall, leaning against the permanent stone fireplace, the cornerstone of the community house. Elijah had the same passion and appearance as he did when

Hale first left years ago, but the two missionaries at the end of the table looked pale. Their eyes blinked slowly. “Brother Paul? Brother Jeremiah? Is everything alright?”

Paul seemed to shake his daze. “Just worried about James and Zackary, Father.” Paul’s face creased with a smile that tried to reinforce his words, but didn’t quite meet his eyes.

“Why don’t we wait until tomorrow and mount a search for them once the rain and night have lifted?” Hale suggested.

“Sounds like a good idea.” Chaytan said, his eyes still on Elijah. “I’m sorry your brothers are lost in the woods. Need I remind you that one of our own is also missing with them? We are taking this as seriously as you are.”

At Chaytan’s words, Elijah exhaled long and hard through his nose and crossed his arms.

“Now,” Hale said, “Tyee, Chaytan, brothers, it’s been three years! Let us drink together. I have much I want to discuss with you.” Chaytan translated; Tyee smiled at this and reached for a ceramic jug on the table and poured some rice beer in small wooden cups and passed them around. Chief Tyee’s action of pouring the drinks himself did not go unnoticed by Hale, and a smile grew on his face as well. Hale flicked his heavy overcoat behind him and sat at one of the stools around the table. Tyee spoke to Chaytan in Miluk and Chaytan translated:

“So, holy man. What brings you back to my humble tribe? Not to say I didn’t miss your company.”

“I told my brothers I’d be back in a few years to see how the mission was going and report back to the church in New Jersey.” Out of the corner of Hale’s eye, he saw Jeremiah reach for one of the rice beer cups. His hand shook and knocked the cup over, spilling the drink on the table.

“M-my apologies,” he said, hastily trying to wipe up his mess with the sleeve of his robe.

“Eh, right,” Chaytan said, he looked unamusedly at Jeremiah, and back to Hale, “The mission, you say. You mean—”

“It’s going quite well actually!” Elijah interjected, “We’ve spoken to a lot of the Natives, and our knowledge of Miluk grows. Not enough to hold full conversations, alas, but we’re making progress.”

“Right, Elijah. I mean the church. How goes the construction?”

“Church?” Chaytan asked.

Before Hale could acknowledge this strange reaction, a Native man burst through the tarp into the room. His arms, though soaked with rain, also dripped with a deep, rusty maroon color. Hale almost thought it was mud with how brown it was, but the texture was off. Not mud. Blood.

Hale’s eyes widened looking at the man, water, and lifewater mixing as they dripped off his coat and onto the floor. The man screamed something in Miluk, his voice cracking. Tyee and Chaytan’s faces contorted with shock and horror. Chaytan and Elijah immediately stood. Elijah reached into his robe quickly and drew something out, but Chaytan was already across the table. Chaytan’s foot hit Elijah’s arm.

CRACK.

The pistol shot echoed. The shot was displaced, the bullet cracking one of the cedar pillars. Hale sat frozen. Paul screamed and dove across the table. His hands encircled Tyee’s throat. The Chief grunted and fell back. Elijah’s single shot expended, he swung his Derringer at Chaytan. Chaytan caught the gun and a war axe flashed from beneath the table.

Hale ran. He stumbled, and caught himself on all fours, sprinting for the exit. The blood covered man attempted to grab Hale, but his hand slid across his rain covered jacket. Hale crashed through the tarp and face first into the mud. Hale heard the brawl behind him as he continued to run. The Natives in the camp all stood, hearing the gun shot and were making their way to the community house. There was no way to reach his horse without pushing through the mob. He turned and ran past the community house towards the coast.

Trying to avoid the dense foliage of the woods, Hale ran North along the rocky edge of a ridge overlooking the beach. The water slammed across the shore below him.

A gun. A gun? Why on God’s Earth did Elijah have a gun? Why did he immediately try to attack Chaytan? And the thing the man said... Elijah and Jerimiah didn’t know Miluk. They reacted as though they did. Or was their reaction to the blood?

The blood. The sight of it. Not the red surface blood from a nose bleed or cat scratch. Dark, arterial blood. But why? Why would they react like that? Nothing made any sense. Rain, sweat, and tears all battled for space in Hale's eyes. He wiped his face, but as he did so, he felt his foot slide across the glistening rock under him.

His breath left him as his back collided with a rock. Hale plummeted over the ridge, feeling like rain himself for a moment before his descent continued. His shin and shoulder cracked against the stone, before Hale tumbled onto the wet sand of the beach. Hale staggered to his feet, but pain lanced through his leg.

He limped forward. He heard voices behind him.

Hale's breathing became even heavier as he willed himself forward with every ounce of strength the Lord would give him.

The voices drew nearer.

Then, Hale saw his salvation. Around the bend, below the ridge and further up the sand was a yawning cave entrance. He could hide there, rest there. His hand found the stony side of the ridge as he took step after painstaking step to the cave.

He entered the cave. It was dry. His shoulder against the wall, Hale continued to limp. He looked down at his leg and saw fresh blood leaking down. Where was he bleeding from? It didn't matter. The voices drew ever nearer. He could just barely make them out. One voice rang out angrier than the other.

"Dammit we were close! The timing was just barely off."

"Do you really think he would've bought that?"

Hale listened hard, the pounding of the rain and the echoes of the cave didn't help him decipher the words.

"It's too late now," the first man said, "We're going to have to resort to our backup plan."

The other man sighed, "Fine."

Hale heard a footstep on stone. He turned to see a silhouette framing the cave entrance. The figure lifted his arm.

“J-James?”

CRACK.

Chapter 1: Purstmarch, Oregon, October 1st, 1899

The early morning sun filtered through the shutters of Crow’s office, slashing lines in the weathered green carpet, and climbing up the wall. Crow slouched at his desk, muttering curses as he attempted to wipe the freshly made coffee stain off his paperwork. “The Murder of Ashleigh Brower” marked the top of the page in large red font. “Assigned to: Detective Casey Bradshaw,” it read under the heading, though none of Crow’s colleagues called him that.

Crow breathed long and hard through his nose, his head falling into his hand. Becoming one of U.S.’ first official detectives sounded like fun to Crow, but Portland wasn’t really the place for it. Crime around here was pretty straightforward. Tensions with Native Americans in the south, desperate migrants in the north. He felt more like a glorified bounty hunter. He could probably solve poor Ashleigh’s murder from the comfort of this seat. Crow groaned. He grabbed his metal coffee mug and took a swig of his almost gelatinously black espresso. Crow reached into his coat pocket to grab his drink from home to wash down this morning slop. As he raised the flask to his lips, Deputy Roland Brand knocked on the door and, infuriatingly, opened the door in the same motion. Crow almost spat his whiskey on the floor, and he hurriedly put the flask below his desk. Crow cleared his throat.

“Deputy.”

“Detective.”

“Another criminal scrounging around?”

“There’s a telegram for you. From the Sheriff of Purstmarch.”

Crow grunted and rose from his seat. He walked, his black trenchcoat swaying, to the station telegram. He sat down and transcribed the Morse code.

Dozens of souls missing in Purstmarch. Mayor miss. since Oct 1.

Crow raised an eyebrow to the uniform-ironed Deputy Brand.

"Where on here does it say this is for me?"

"For a case like that?" Brand said, shrugging, "Who else would we send?"

#

The fall breeze whipped through the trees. A throng of people gathered around a woman dressed in all black. She stood atop the porch of her house, her face gray. The crowd escalated in volume, reporters talking over each other. Mrs. Derby had a black feather in her hat and a black veil over her face. She was the mayor's wife. Towards the back of the small crowd, Samantha Whitfield slid between two larger men, working her way to the front. Her hands shook slightly as she clutched her notepad and pencil close. This was it. Her chance. A man from the front shouted above the rest,

"You wear mourning clothes, does that mean you believe the mayor is dead?"

Samantha pushed closer. A large man knocked into Sam's shoulder, sending her careening into another woman.

"So sorry," Samantha said, with a smile that felt more like a wince.

"Who will run the city while the mayor is missing?" a man almost roared in Sam's ear.

"Do you have any leads, Sheriff?"

The gray woman just stood there, shell shocked. Her eyes flashed behind the veil. Her hands clutched her white painted porch railing. A man emerged from the crowd, stomping up the stairs of the porch. Salt and pepper hair sat shadowed under the man's wide white hat. A startlingly polished silver revolver sat at his hip. He turned to address the crowd.

"As you all know, me and my Deputy are spread incredibly thin. We are doing our absolute best to investigate this case."

A man's voice rang out, "Sheriff, does that mean you're calling outside help?"

Sam almost tuned out the rest. Her eyes fixed on Mrs. Derby. Sam staggered through the crowd bumping into more people. She didn't care. Almost there.

"Mrs. Derby, was there anything in the letters Mayor Derby sent you that indicated he felt unsafe on his return?" Samantha's voice cut through the crowd. She almost didn't recognize the voice herself. Mrs. Derby's face somehow grew paler, almost blue. Her eyes flashed again under the veil. Sam, just below the porch now, looked up. Mrs. Derby's mouth pulled down almost comically in an exaggerated frown. Her eyes were wide and leaking tears, though she made no sound other than her rattled breathing through her nose. She began to rock back and forth. Her eyes were now locked onto Samantha.

"Ehm, Mrs. Derby, perhaps it's best if you go back inside?" The Sheriff pulled the gray lady back towards the door, his eyebrows crossed in worry.

Samantha's notepad stood, stark white under the gloomy sky. Mrs. Derby watched Sam over her shoulder the entire way inside. The porch now stood empty. But she couldn't leave with nothing. No. There had to be someone around right? Samantha's eyes scanned the crowd for any other familiar faces, anyone close to the mayor, or high ranking town officials. There!

A disheveled man stood, unmoving. The crowd slowly dispersed, mumbling amongst themselves. His eyes stared, glassy and barely blinking at the Sheriff and the mayor's wife disappearing slowly through the white front door. Samantha turned to the man. Gareth Bullock, Purstmarch treasurer, thirty-five year old bachelor, and Samantha's first real interview from the town hall she'd attended last week. She approached him tentatively. He rocked back and forth, shifting his weight from leg to leg. Samantha was feet from him, but his gaze remained fixed on the shadowed windows of the Mayor's house.

"Mr. Bullock...?"

Gareth's face snapped into an imitation of normalcy. He wore a grey suit, the undershirt unbuttoned and wrinkled. His hair, usually swept backwards, was a mess atop his head. His face was lined with deep wrinkles that she could've sworn he didn't have before. Had he been wearing makeup?

His lips stretched into a flat smile. His eyes, seemingly dragging behind the rest of him, finally met Sam's.

"Ah, um, hello. My apologies, but I have no comment for the press." His breath stung her nose, reeking of alcohol. Dark bags sat under his eyes. Before Sam could formulate a question he had already begun shambling away. She couldn't let another lead get away from her.

"Uh, Mr. Bullock, remember me? From town hall?" Even in his shambling state his long stride kept him moving ahead of Samantha. "I just wanted to ask if you and the Mayor talked before his trip?" she asked.

"The Mayor was my dear friend. I told him he should have stayed put."

Was? The peculiarities of this town were beginning to weigh on her. At the previous town hall meeting they had discussed the missing residents of Purstmarch like they were still alive. What was different here? Gareth Bullock strode away. Samantha stood alone again in the streets of Purstmarch. She looked back at the Mayor's manor. Its stark white walls reminded her of bones. The windows were dark pits, black curtains obscuring outside view. She realized her hands were squeezing her notepad tightly. She released her grip with her clammy hand. A raven's cry cut through the cloudy afternoon sky.

#

The jolt from the carriage gave Crow a headache. It was the third day on the road. What else was there to do on the road other than drink? Crow massaged his temples as the carriage jolted again. He missed the city roads. Somehow those annoying cobbles were leagues better than forest trails. He'd never complain again. Behind the Tobiano patterned horse pulling the wagon, the smartly dressed driver turned back towards Crow.

"Last leg of the journey, Detective. Another two hours and you'll be in Purstmarch."

Crow took a surreptitious swig of whiskey in silent celebration. He leaned on the small window of the carriage and gazed out at the forest around them. The sun filtered from the east through

the trees; the dark green pines contrasting the red and orange path that autumn created under the cart. The leaves crunched under wheels and hooves. The Tobiano pulled dutifully, her brown mane bobbing up and down as the carriage bore onward. Crow bravely abstained from his flask for the rest of the way to Purstmarch; who knows the quality of liquor in this middle of nowhere town? The carriage rattled to a stop.

Crow stepped down from the carriage, his black travel boots thumping onto the dirt. He adjusted his hat and grabbed his effects: a travel bag with his clothes, his flask, cigarettes, revolver, bullets, and his other detective gear. The driver turned the horse around.

“If you need a ride back to Portland, send for me,” the driver said, his thin mustache wobbling.

“I’ll be done by the time the telegram gets to you,” Crow turned from the man, facing the town, and the sea just beyond it.

“Maybe this case will take your fancy?”

Crow snorted softly. It was true that his cases rarely dealt with city officials. He didn’t want to make the common mistake of holding out hope. He waved behind him to the driver and started towards Purstmarch.

The town was near silent. The ocean tossed continuously just beyond the town. A hanging sign swung back and forth with a soft *creak...creak*. Crow approached the main road. It felt too wide. Two buildings poked higher than the rest of the village. The cross adorned peak of a chapel and the spinning beacon of a lighthouse stood as tall as the pines surrounding Purstmarch. The echoes of Crow’s boots knocked against the shoddy wooden houses at the edge of town. Further in stood taller and taller buildings, though none surpassing three floors. Oil lamps dotted the streets of the city, some crooked, sinking into the muddy streets. They cast harsh orange shadows against the brick of the interior town. Crow heard the thump of horse hooves on packed dirt, but saw no horse. The smell of the salty sea sprayed in the air. There also wafted the faint tang of blood. Crow wondered if there was a butchery nearby.

Though Crow’s march looked purposeful, black coat flapping behind him and all, he was really wandering. The first step of his process was always to get a good overview of the crime scene.

With dozens of people missing, the crime scene is the entire town. From the outside streets working inward, Crow started to develop a decent sense of the town. It was a decently small place, able to walk from its two furthest points in only fifteen minutes. He scrawled the points of interest, the sheriff's office, the town hall, the church, the lighthouse, in his notepad crafting a crude map.

A twinge of pain hit Crow's lip and he realized he'd been biting it. Was he anxious about the case? No. Some strange sense of unease had begun to spread within him, even the minute he stepped out of the carriage that brought him here. He still hadn't seen a single person. He wasn't overly fond of company, especially on the job, but as he completed his canvas of Purstmarch, the unease settled in the bottom of his stomach like sediment and stayed there. He shook his head. Of course there aren't going to be people around. If several people had gone missing in a small frontier town like this, word would've gotten around. Not to mention the missing mayor himself. Crow had almost forgotten about him.

The sediment in Crow's stomach bubbled like magma. The feeling spiked. He never leaned on intuition or gut feelings but this was different. Someone was watching him. He looked behind him, between his hat and collar, and saw another eye looking back at him. Between the faded blue curtains of the building behind him someone stood, their head barely cocked around the curtain. They maintained eye contact for a moment, before the eye moved backwards into the darkness of the building. Crow took his revolver from his bag and placed it inside his coat.

He then made his way to his first stop. The sheriff's office, Crow's brow felt heavy. He squeezed his eyes shut firmly before approaching the sheriff's office. It was a squat building, painted a blue now salt worn. He pushed the door open. It was a small space, only about the size of Crow's living room. A cell that could only really be meant for one took up the far wall. There were two desks pushed together in the center of the room. A door sat ajar to Crow's left.

"Deputy? Are you back?" came a voice from beyond the door.

"It's Detective Crow from the Portland police department."

"Oh! Be right out."

A man emerged from the door, a broad brimmed white hat sat on his head, a gold buckle sat in the center. A thick light gray mustache and mutton chops dominated the man's thin face. His spurs clinked and jangled loudly as he approached.

"The Sheriff, I presume?" said Crow, extending his hand.

"That'd be me. A pleasure." The Sheriff clasped Crow's hand firmly.

"So, the disappearances." Crow pulled out one of the chairs at the center desk and took a seat. "What should I know before beginning my investigation?"

The Sheriff swung his bone white boots up on a chair, and sparked a match on his boot. He walked to a lamp in the corner of the room, and lit it, washing the office in warm light.

"The Mayor was on a trip out to some island chain in the west, hunting with his buddies from Portland," he said, walking and sitting across from Crow. His hat shielded half his face from the lamp, casting a shadow across his face. "They all came by to drop him off at the docks. Those of us at the docks to greet him, saw and waved to him as the ship approached the harbor. But as everyone got off the boat, the Mayor never got to the shore."

Crow's eyebrows pinched together.

"You mean the Mayor disappeared between the time when the boat came into harbor and when the passengers offloaded?"

"You see why we called in an expert such as yourself."

Maybe the carriage driver was right. This did seem like a puzzle worth solving. He fought back a twitch in the corner of his lip.

"Well," Crow said, standing from the table, "if I have more specific questions, I'll come back. I want to get a decent idea of the sce-"

The door burst open, and in came a tall, skinny, ginger young man with a Deputy's badge on his chest and a black derby hat. The man froze in the doorway, his pale face flushing.

"Come on in Deputy, you should be here anyways."

"You called him? You said..." the Deputy composed himself and removed his hat. "Sorry sir. Deputy Hayden Peregrine at your service."

“Please,” Crow batted the formalities away with his hand. “No need for that. I’m Detective Crow.”

“Crow? Like the bird?” Almost as soon as these words left Deputy Peregrine’s mouth he winced like his own banality hurt him physically. Crow just looked at him.

“Sorry sir.” Peregrine’s face was completely red now. “Just not a name I’m used to is all.”

“I’m glad you got here Hayden,” the Sheriff said, “with your knowledge of the town I wanted you to go with him.”

“What?!” Both Crow and Peregrine said in unison. The Sheriff seemed almost taken aback by the sudden unified front.

“I work better alone.” Crow drawled at the same time as Hayden said,

“I was already on this case.”

The two looked at each other.

“Hayden, no offense but you’re only 21.” The Sheriff broke the silence. “Taking a case of this magnitude on your own is not possible. And Detective, a man as smart as yourself can see the benefits of having someone familiar with the town during your investigation.”

“You have no other more experienced officers?” Crow said.

“Ehm. It’s only the two of us.” Hayden said, wilted. At this the Sheriff’s cheeks also tinged pink.

“It’s unfortunately true, Detective. For decades I was this town’s only Sheriff. The town has really only recently become big enough that I needed help. Even then, a crime on this scale is unheard of in Purstmarch. Even when I asked for help, Hayden was the only one to volunteer. This town is just not built for violence. More guns rarely solve the issue. Now this town doesn’t need just another gun. From either of you.”

Crow leaned back in his chair. His eyes surveyed the gangly ginger before him.

“Alright,” Crow finally said, “come on, Deputy.” Crow stood quickly and strode to the door with a flap of his coat. Peregrine stood there for a second, then dashed after him out the door.

