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The Orphan List

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Introduction

The package arrived on a Wednesday, the city still wet from a morning storm that hadn't bothered to cool the air. Claire set it on her kitchen counter beside a stack of unfinished notes and watched a line of water trace the box's taped seam. No return address—just a Gray Harbor postmark, a smudged date, and the kind of cheap brown that remembered every thumbprint. Her editor's texts vibrated once, twice: Where are we with the statehouse piece? She silenced the phone and reached for a knife.

Inside, a manila envelope lay like a relic. Her name was written on the tab in a careful hand she didn't recognize. Beneath it, in darker ink, someone had scrawled another: Jonah Mercer. She had to sit to open it, the chair cold against her legs, a familiar pressure gathering at the base of her skull. Eighteen years since Jonah vanished between one tide and the next, and still her body braced for the sound of his voice.

The paper inside smelled faintly of damp basements and old file cabinets, a thin line of mildew running along one edge. There was no letter. Just a folded sheet—ruled, torn from a ledger—and a smaller square of notebook paper that had been stuck to it with aging tape. The smaller note bore two words in block letters, almost childish in their insistence: Orphan List. Claire unfolded the ledger page with both hands. Names unfurled down the column, dates and addresses breathless with abbreviations, and a series of neat checkmarks that skipped some lines and pressed hard into others. The names were a roll call of shadows from her childhood: kids who drifted in and out of classrooms and kitchens, boys who showed up in oversized sweaters, girls who stopped speaking for entire weeks. Halfway down, there he was: Jonah Mercer.

Her heartbeat steadied into a reporter's rhythm: observe, verify, follow the thread. She traced the addresses with her finger, looking for the familiar curl of a street she used to cut down after school, an apartment above the bait shop, a clapboard house with too many locks. Some entries had been crossed out and rewritten in a different hand. One of the corrections didn't even try to hide itself; a family name she knew from the news and from the summer parades and from the neat brass plaques on the harbor's brick walk: Crowe.

Claire stood and crossed to the window. The city pressed itself against the glass—sirens pitched high, a bus sighing at the curb, the neon smear of a deli sign. Beyond the streetlights she could see nothing of the sea, but her skin remembered the way Gray Harbor's wind salted everything, from laundry to language. She had left to outrun the tide of that town and the quiet agreement that made bad things polite. She had built a life on asking questions no one wanted asked. And still, the list made her feel eleven again, counting the gulls on the breaker rocks while Jonah dared the slick,

forbidden ladder down to the water.

Her phone rang this time, the old area code flashing like a warning. “Ms. Mercer?” a woman asked, voice clipped, official. “This is a courtesy call about tomorrow’s memorial service for Jonah. The community center is dedicating a bench. We thought you might want to say a few words.” The woman didn’t wait for an answer before adding, softening, “It would mean a lot to the town.” The line clicked dead with the practiced kindness Claire had grown up on—the kind that left you indebted.

She spread the papers again, smoothed the creases, and felt a chill move through her that had nothing to do with the air-conditioning. The Orphan List wasn’t an obituary, but it read like one. Every checked box was a decision. Every erased name felt like a thumb pressed hard enough to bruise. If this list existed, someone had kept it. If someone had kept it, someone wanted it found.

She thumbed a pen from behind her ear and wrote questions in the margins until the page became a net: Who made this? Why the corrections? Why Crowe? She circled Jonah’s name until the ink threatened to bleed through the fiber. The central question rose, uninvited and undeniable, the one she had rearranged her life to avoid: What happened to Jonah—and to the others who had been moved through Gray Harbor like supplies on a tide chart, in and out, accounted for until they weren’t?

Claire slid the list back into the envelope and placed it in her bag, the weight of it ridiculous and real. She texted her editor: Taking a quick trip. Back in two days with something better. She pictured the harbor she’d sworn off—its lighthouse stuttering through fog, the fish plant’s metal hum, the Crowe Foundation’s banner strung over Main Street in sea-worn blues. In the reflection on her window, she caught her own face, older, harder, and for a breath she saw Jonah beside her, a blur of motion, grinning like he’d gotten away with something. “I’m coming,” she told the empty room. Then she killed the lights and let the city go dark around her, the list warm against her side like a pulse.

CHAPTER ONE: The Faded Placard

The trip back to Gray Harbor took five hours and felt like a decade. Claire drove through the tail end of the city's rain and into a sun that stuck low and white on the windshield, turning the road into a ribbon of glare. She took the old coastal route instead of the turnpike, the one that skimmed the edge of the water and gave her back the smell of salt and creosote. It was a penance drive, the kind that starts in practical decisions—gas, coffee, a second sweater—and ends in remembered grievances. She didn't put on music. She listened to the tires hum out their question: Why now? Why again? She kept the manila envelope flat on the passenger seat, a pale square that seemed to watch the dash.

The state highway narrowed and shouldered itself with maples and tired fences, then let her down into the throat of the town. Gray Harbor had a way of standing up when you came home and pretending it hadn't moved an inch. The cannery still steamed on hot afternoons and stank of fish on cold ones. The old mill windows were broken in the same upper-left squares. The high school's sign still misspelled "achievements" with a missing vowel, the error long since dignified by time. The traffic light at Main and Elm blinked yellow for caution. Claire caught herself counting. She always counted when she came back: the storefronts changed hands, the houses with new paint, the gulls on the breaker wall, the steps up to the library, seven as always. Seven and then the stretch of brick along the harbor with the embedded brass plaques, the town's neat little memorial to itself.

She parked behind the community center, where the gravel was loose and the shadows were long even at noon. The building had been a school when she was a child and still wore the metal emblem from its old name over the door, faded to the color of bone. Inside, a pair of folding tables had been set up with a coffee urn and a stack of paper cups that never seemed to diminish. A banner had been hung in sea-washed blues across the far wall—Jonah Mercer Memorial Bench Dedication, 6:00 PM—anchored on the left by a thumbtack and on the right by a piece of duct tape that was starting to curl. Claire stood at the back and let the quiet collect, the smell of floor wax and mildew, the hollow acoustics of a room where speeches happen and no one listens.

A man in a blazer that didn't fit his shoulders approached. He had a volunteer badge clipped crooked to his lapel and the watery, polite look of someone who had been told to handle the difficult relative. "Ms. Mercer?" he asked, extending a hand. "I'm Walt Sutter, from the foundation. We're so glad you could make it. Mayor Crowe will be here at six, and Sheriff Hale is going to say a few words. Would you like some coffee? There's also water." He gestured toward the table like he was showing off a yacht.

Claire thanked him without committing. She wasn't thirsty, but she took a cup anyway so her hands would have something to do.

"Did Jonah have a favorite spot?" Walt asked, softening his voice into the kind used for memorial services and hospital waiting rooms. "We thought near the harbor overlook, but they're repaving the path. This bench will sit right here, by the entrance. People will see it." He smiled like he was solving a small equation. Claire thought of Jonah on the cannery roof, daring the gulls to come closer; of Jonah slipping down the ladder to the tide pool when the tide was wrong; of Jonah's face in the window of the group home, watching the cars pass like they were stories. She thought of the last time she saw him alive and didn't know it was the last time. "It's a good spot," she said, because he was waiting.

She left Walt to his clipboard and wandered the perimeter of the room. It was a habit, not just reporting but childhood survival: map your exits, find the corners where no one looks, catalog the people who watch without reason. A cluster of town elders stood by the window discussing the approaching storm season, the ones who still called it "the season" like it was an opera they subscribed to. A woman in a church dress was talking to a man with a union pin, their heads bent together as if sharing a map. A janitor pushed a dry mop in slow arcs that left the linoleum gleaming under the fluorescent buzz. On the far wall, the town had hung a series of laminated posters with volunteer programs and fundraising initiatives, a rotating gallery of good deeds and smiling children under the banner of the Crowe Foundation. She walked along the display without intending to, scanning the captions.

Halfway down, she stopped. She was close enough to see the hairline crack in the laminating sheet and the way it bent the letter G in a line of text. The poster was for a foster family support program, designed with the sort of beige earnestness that never turns off the evening news. In the photo, children in bright jackets clustered on a dock, squinting against the sun. It was a stock image—Claire could tell by the way the light hit the water, too even, too clean for Gray Harbor's bruised coastline. The caption listed a series of names in a block on the left. Volunteers, donors, whatever they called themselves. She read them because the human brain does that when words are arranged in rows. Then she read them again. Her breath stuck like a gear tooth.

Halfway down the list, she saw a name that made the coffee cup tremble in her hand. Jonah Mercer.

She blinked, thinking it a trick of memory—maybe a different Jonah, an adult with a life that had nothing to do with her. But it was his full name, spelled correctly, printed like an epitaph among other names. The letters were perfect, clean, untouched by the boy who hated handwriting and drew his J's like hooks. Claire looked at the children in the stock-photo jackets and saw no one she recognized. She looked at the list of names and felt the room tilt. The laminated poster reflected a distorted version of

herself, older and pulled thin. Her first thought was a reporter's: get a picture. Her second was a sister's: tear it down.

She reached for her phone, realized her fingers were shaking, and set the coffee on a windowsill. She took two shots of the poster, the flash off, the grid of names framed as best she could in the lamplight. She shifted to the left to get the caption and caught her own reflection again, then a second figure stepping up beside her in the glass. She turned before he spoke.

"Evening, Claire." Sheriff Thomas Hale wore his uniform like a suit he'd grown into over time, the shirt crisp, the belt heavy with the hardware of his trade. He was older than the last time she'd seen him—had to be, they both were—but he carried the years with a steady hand and the kind of smile that reached his eyes and left his mouth undecided. He had a paper cup in one hand and a small, careful distance between them. "Walt told me you were here early. I was glad to hear it. You look well. The city agrees with you."

"Sheriff," she said. Her voice sounded like it had come through a tunnel. "It's good to see you." It wasn't entirely a lie. There was a comfort in his presence, a recollection of summers when he would walk the beach and give out the same warning to the same kids, harmless as a kindly weather report. It was hard to reconcile that with the weight of the envelope on her car seat. Hale glanced at the poster, just for a second, then back to her.

"We don't usually put up these displays without permission," he said, his tone lighthearted, the kind of rebuke that pretends to be a joke. "But the foundation is running a drive, and Walt gets enthusiastic. That's Jonah's name there, isn't it?" He didn't make it an accusation. He made it an acknowledgment, the way you might say a person's name at a graveside to keep it from fading. "Hard to believe it's been so long. Hard on everyone. Good you're here for it."

"Did you know about this?" Claire asked, gesturing to the poster. She kept her voice low, a professional calm sliding over the panic. "About his name being used like this? On a list of volunteers, donors. Whoever put this together must have had a reason. Where did they get the names?" She watched him for the smallest tells, the ones she'd learned to spot in city council meetings and press conferences, the way a mouth goes tight at the corners when a truth needs trimming.

Hale shifted his weight and took a sip from his cup. He looked at the poster again, longer this time. "The foundation keeps records. People donate time, money. Sometimes families are involved in the programs. It could be an error. It could be the kind of mistake that happens when you're trying to fill a line with names and you look at old paperwork the wrong way." He turned back to her. "But I hear you've been looking at old paperwork yourself. That's a complicated road. People keep their

memories in odd places in this town.”

The air in the room felt suddenly heavier. There were ways to interpret what he’d just said. Some were friendly. Some were not. Claire nodded, letting the silence sit, a reporter’s trick that puts the other person in charge of filling it. Hale obliged.

“We’re all grateful for what you’re doing,” he said. “People think we forget out here on the coast. We don’t. We just take our time. The memorial is a good thing. It’s better to remember, and to do it together.” He set his cup down on the windowsill, next to hers. “Mayor Crowe will say a few words. She cares about these programs. She’ll be pleased you came.”

He left then, or at least moved away, drawn off by a woman with a stack of programs and a question about where to put the extra chairs. Claire took another picture of the poster, her hand steadier now. She looked at the list again, not just Jonah’s name but the others, the architecture of a pattern. She could feel the shape of it even without knowing what it meant, the same way you feel the edge of a missing tooth with your tongue. A room full of people was arranging itself around her, and she had the sudden, cold sensation of standing on a grate, something moving under her feet.

She left the community center through the side door, stepping into the briny air that always seemed to carry the town’s old conversations. The sun had slipped behind a bank of cloud, turning the harbor the color of coin. She walked past the boarded-up storefronts, past the bait shop with its string of dried starfish, past the neat brick promenade where the brass plaques gleamed in the damp. The names on the plaques were the kind you saw in stone: donors, founders, benefactors. Crowe was there, in more than one spot. She could feel the list warming her pocket like a second heartbeat.

Back at her car, she spread the Orphan List on the passenger seat and held her phone over it to compare. The poster names were clean and public. The list in her hands was cramped, written in a hurried hand that had tried to be neat and given up. It was broken into columns: names, dates, addresses, and a series of checks and crosses. Some lines were whole. Some were cut in half by a thick pen stroke, the kind that says this person no longer matters, or this person should never have been here at all. Jonah’s entry was one of the few without a cross, but there was a correction in the margin, a name written small and careful: Crowe. The same correction appeared on other lines, as if someone had tidied the past.

She took a breath and started the car. The engine coughed once, then settled. She drove along the harbor road with her window down, letting the cold slap at her face. The lighthouse stood out on the point, its white stripe stark against the gray of the sea and sky. A memory rose uninvited: Jonah and her, huddled on the widow’s walk of the old clifftop house that wasn’t theirs, watching the beam sweep across the water,

counting the seconds between flashes. He had been small enough that the wind seemed to bother him more, thin in his bones, stubborn in his joy. He'd made up a game about lighthouse signals, pretending he could read them like a code. *One flash means stay. Two means run.* She had laughed. He had never laughed like that again after the year the light went out for maintenance and the town had to make do with a flashing buoy.

She drove home—her mother's house, technically, though her mother hadn't lived there for years—and parked on the street. The house was still the same pale yellow with the peeling white trim, the same wind-chime that no longer chimed because half the pieces had rusted off. Inside, the air smelled faintly of lavender sachets and dust. She set the envelope on the kitchen table, took out the list, and smoothed it under the overhead light. She made herself wait, a discipline, a ritual. She poured a glass of water. She took off her shoes. She placed her phone on record, not because she was interviewing anyone, but because the habit made her feel like she had a job to do and wasn't just falling into a grave.

Then she began.

She crossed off names that she recognized as grown-ups from her childhood, people who had been moved into the column of memory. She circled the ones she didn't know. She underlined the addresses and tried to place them. A few were familiar: the bait shop apartment, the cannery foreman's house, a clapboard near the edge of town where the road gave up and became dirt. She noted the patterns in the checks and crosses. Not every checked line was a child she remembered. Not every crossed-out line was a name she knew. But the dates were spaced in a rhythm that made sense to anyone who had lived in foster care: the start of a school year, the end of a fiscal year, a sudden move before a holiday. This was a ledger of comings and goings, written for someone who needed to keep track.

When she turned to the back page, she saw it. A block of entries had been pasted over with a strip of paper, glued down and written over in a neater hand, the kind of careful penmanship that meant authority. Jonah's name wasn't under the strip. Jonah was beside it, one line down, written after a date that stuck out like a pin. She stared at the date, then at the calendar on the wall, the one with a lighthouse on it that had come free from the hardware store every year for as long as she could remember. The date was one day after the official report said he'd vanished. Claire felt a small, dark room open inside her. Someone had recorded a detail after the fact. Someone had continued to keep track of Jonah after he disappeared.

She picked up the phone and dialed a number from memory. On the fourth ring, a voice answered, cautious, as if she'd woken someone from a nap. "County Department of Social Services. This is Miriam."

“Miriam,” Claire said, trying for warmth. “It’s Claire Mercer. I used to be in the system. Back when you ran intake at the old office on Pearl.” She waited. She could hear the small, mechanical tick of a clock.

“I remember you,” Miriam said, the voice careful, the words spaced. “You got out. Good for you.”

“I’m working on a story,” Claire lied, not entirely. “I need a favor. It’s about placement records from a long time ago. Do you have the year I’m thinking of? Are there gaps? I’m looking for a specific file.”

There was a long silence, and then the sound of a chair scraping. “Claire,” Miriam said, sounding tired. “Some files are lost. Water damage. Budget cuts. Things get misfiled. You know how it is. We do our best.” Another silence, longer. “You shouldn’t be digging in that basement. People built houses on top of that basement for a reason.” The line clicked.

Claire set the phone down. She looked at the list again, at the crossed-out names and the neat corrections. She thought of the poster in the community center and of Hale’s careful smile. She thought of the way the town looked when you approached it from the water: all its edges softened by fog, the lighthouse steady, the houses stacked against the cliff like shells.

She reached for a pen and began to write in the margins of the list, small questions that had the shape of a life. She stopped when the ink bled on the paper, a dark bloom that swallowed the last two letters of Jonah’s name. Outside, the wind came up and tapped the window with the edge of a torn screen. She held the list in both hands and felt the past press back.

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