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Shadow Over Riverbend Mystery

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CHAPTER ONE: The Still Waters of Riverbend

The morning sun, still a timid artist, brushed the eastern sky with hues of tangerine and rose, tentatively reaching across the sleepy town of Riverbend. The mist, a gossamer veil, clung to the surface of the Blackwater River, obscuring the far bank and lending an ethereal quality to the familiar landscape. It was a scene painted by tranquility, a picture of small-town peace that had remained largely undisturbed for decades. Fishermen, already out in their skiffs, were merely silhouettes, their lines casting barely a ripple on the glassy surface. The air smelled of damp earth, pine, and the faint, comforting aroma of brewing coffee from the diner on Main Street.

Riverbend wasn't a town that invited much drama. Its claim to fame was its exceptional trout fishing and the annual Riverbend Folk Festival, which drew a modest crowd every summer. People came here to escape the hustle, to trade the cacophony of city life for the gentle hum of cicadas and the distant cry of an osprey. The local newspaper, the *Riverbend Gazette*, usually filled its pages with reports on high school football games, bake sale announcements, and occasional debates about zoning ordinances for a new bait and tackle shop. Anything remotely scandalous was typically confined to the whispered conversations over fences and at the local grocery store checkout.

Sarah Jenkins, a woman whose roots in Riverbend went back three generations, was already on her morning jog along the river path. Her breath plumed in the cool air, a steady rhythm against the quiet dawn. She loved these early hours, the world still hushed, before the day's demands began to clamor. The path, worn smooth by countless footsteps, wound through stands of willow and sycamore, offering intermittent glimpses of the river. Sarah, a creature of habit, knew every turn, every gnarled root that threatened a stumble.

She was approaching the old boathouse, a relic from the town's earlier, more prosperous days as a logging hub, when something unusual caught her eye. It wasn't the usual discarded fishing line or stray beer can; this was different. A patch of vibrant color, jarringly out of place against the muted greens and browns of the riverbank, drew her attention. Her pace, usually steady and rhythmic, faltered. A knot of unease began to tighten in her stomach.

As she drew closer, the mist, which had begun to thin, revealed a clearer, more disturbing image. It was a red slicker, partially submerged in the shallow water near the bank, snagged on a fallen branch. The bright fabric seemed almost fluorescent in the pale light. Sarah's heart began to thud, a sudden, frantic drumbeat against her ribs. She stopped, her eyes fixed on the anomaly, a growing sense of dread washing

over her.

She took a hesitant step off the path, pushing through the dewy undergrowth, her running shoes squelching softly in the mud. The air, which had moments ago felt crisp and invigorating, now carried a faint, unsettling odor – something metallic, something... wrong. Her mind, usually so quick to rationalize, struggled to process what she was seeing. It couldn't be. Not here. Not in Riverbend.

The red slicker wasn't empty. A pale hand, almost translucent, emerged from the sleeve, its fingers splayed, reaching towards the sky as if in a final, desperate plea. Sarah gasped, a small, choked sound that was swallowed by the immense silence of the morning. Her breath hitched, and a wave of nausea rolled over her. There was no mistaking it. This was not a misplaced item of clothing. This was a person.

Panic, cold and sharp, began to claw at her throat. She wanted to scream, to run, to unsee the horrifying tableau before her, but her feet felt rooted to the muddy earth. Her gaze traced the outline of the submerged form, the dark hair fanning out in the water, the stillness of it all. It was utterly, irrevocably still.

Finally, with a burst of adrenaline, Sarah found her voice, though it was a raw, trembling cry. She fumbled for her phone, her fingers numb and clumsy as she dialed the emergency number. The voice on the other end, calm and professional, seemed impossibly distant, alien to the surreal horror unfolding before her eyes. She tried to articulate what she was seeing, but the words caught in her throat, dissolving into a series of panicked gasps.

"There's... there's a body," she managed to stammer, her voice barely a whisper. "By the boathouse. In the river. Someone... someone is dead." The stillness of the Blackwater River, which had moments ago epitomized peace, now felt like a heavy shroud, pressing down on Riverbend, forever altering its quiet calm. The sun, now fully risen, cast long, accusatory shadows, revealing the full, brutal reality of the morning.

CHAPTER TWO: A Body on the Banks

The sirens, a jarring lament against the tranquil morning, tore through Riverbend's usual quiet. First, a distant wail, then a crescendo as the patrol car and ambulance raced down Main Street, their urgency a stark contrast to the sleepy storefronts. Heads popped out of doorways, curtains twitched, and conversations at the diner abruptly ceased. News, even bad news, traveled fast in Riverbend, but this kind of news was unprecedented. A body. In the river.

Sheriff Brody, his face already etched with the weariness of a man who'd seen too many small-town follies but rarely true tragedy, arrived on the scene minutes later. His patrol car, a Ford Explorer that had seen better days, skidded to a stop near Sarah Jenkins's mud-splattered running shoes. Sarah, still trembling, was huddled by a sycamore tree, wrapped in a blanket someone from the ambulance crew had thoughtfully provided. Her eyes, wide and unfocused, stared at the grim tableau by the water's edge.

"Sarah, are you alright?" Brody asked, his voice rough but kind. He'd known Sarah since she was a freckle-faced kid selling lemonade. The sight of her, so shaken, only deepened the knot in his stomach. He didn't wait for an answer, already scanning the scene.

The medical examiner, Dr. Elena Rodriguez, a no-nonsense woman with a sharp mind and even sharper wit, was already kneeling by the victim. Her gloved hands moved with practiced efficiency, taking notes, snapping photos. A young deputy, barely out of the academy, stood a few paces back, his face a pale green, trying not to look directly at the body.

The man in the red slicker was now fully visible, gently pulled further onto the bank by the first responders. His face, partially submerged moments before, was a ghastly white, framed by dark, matted hair. His eyes were open, staring blankly at the sky. A jagged gash on his temple and an unnatural rigidity in his posture told a silent, chilling story.

"Any ID, Elena?" Brody asked, keeping his voice low, his gaze sweeping the immediate area for any obvious signs of struggle or misplaced items.

Dr. Rodriguez straightened, pushing a stray strand of dark hair from her face. "Not yet, Brody. No wallet in his pockets, no obvious tags on the slicker. Looks like he's been in the water for a while. Twenty-four hours, maybe more, depending on the current and temperature." She paused, then added, grimly, "And this wasn't a swimming

accident.”

Brody nodded. He hadn't expected it to be. The gash on the temple, even from a distance, looked too deliberate, too violent. Riverbend might be quiet, but even here, he knew, evil could fester.

The scene quickly became a hive of activity. Crime scene tape, stark yellow against the green foliage, was strung up, sealing off the area around the old boathouse. Deputies combed the riverbank, their eyes scanning for anything out of place – a dropped item, a scuff mark, anything that could offer a clue. A small crowd of curious onlookers, drawn by the sirens and the sudden flurry of activity, began to gather at a respectful distance, their hushed whispers carrying on the crisp morning air.

“Anyone recognize him?” Brody asked, addressing his deputies and scanning the faces of the early arrivals. No one volunteered. The man was a stranger, or at least, not a familiar face in a town where everyone knew everyone else’s business. This complicated matters significantly. A local murder was one thing; a body showing up out of nowhere was another entirely.

Brody walked closer to the water’s edge, careful not to disturb anything. The river, usually a source of calm and livelihood, now felt menacing, a silent accomplice to a dark act. The red slicker, now fully exposed, was surprisingly intact, but the face beneath the hood was stark, lifeless.

“Blunt force trauma to the head, Brody,” Dr. Rodriguez confirmed, without being asked. “Looks like he was hit hard. And then... well, the river did the rest.” She didn’t elaborate, but Brody understood. Drowning, after a blow like that, wasn't unlikely. Or perhaps, he was already dead before he hit the water. Either way, it was murder.

His mind raced, trying to piece together the fragments. Who was this man? Why was he here? And most importantly, who wanted him dead? Riverbend had no major criminal element, no gang activity, no history of violent crime beyond the occasional bar fight that ended with a black eye and a handshake. This was different. This was cold, calculated.

Brody pulled out his radio. “Dispatch, I need a perimeter secured. No one in, no one out without my say-so. And I need a full dive team. The river might hold more answers.” He also requested a forensic team from the state, knowing his small department lacked the resources for a case of this magnitude. This wasn’t just a local incident anymore; it was quickly escalating into something far more sinister.

He looked back at Sarah, still shivering despite the blanket, her gaze fixed on the body as if hypnotized. Her discovery had shattered the illusion of Riverbend’s peace, revealing a lurking darkness beneath its placid surface. The still waters, once a symbol

of tranquility, now held a terrifying secret. And Sheriff Brody knew, with a chilling certainty, that this was just the beginning. The shadow had fallen, and it was only a matter of time before it consumed the whole town.

As the sun climbed higher, burning away the last wisps of mist, the scene solidified into a grim reality. The yellow tape, the flashing lights, the grim faces of the responders – it was all a stark invasion into Riverbend's gentle rhythm. The fishermen had long since packed up their skiffs, their morning catch forgotten. The aroma of brewing coffee from Main Street seemed to fade, replaced by the acrid scent of mud and something colder, something metallic.

Brody sighed, running a hand over his tired face. This was going to be a long day, and likely, an even longer investigation. The peace of Riverbend was shattered, and it was his job to pick up the pieces, to uncover the truth behind the stranger in the red slicker. He had a feeling that the answers, when they came, would shake the quiet town to its very core. The Blackwater River, once a source of comfort, now seemed to whisper tales of deceit and death.

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