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BRENDA
NOVAK

BEFORE
WE
WERE
STRANGERS

A NOVEL

"The best romantic thriller I have read."
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BONUS SCENE

Before We Were Strangers - Bonus Scene

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BONUS SCENE

*Keller Police Department
Keller, Texas*

Startled when he heard the thud of something heavy being dropped on his desk, Detective John Ramos swiveled away from his computer to see what was going on. Larry Polanski, a tall, bony, grizzled detective who'd spent over forty years on the force and was now retiring to be able to care for his sick wife, stood, hunched over a little more than usual, above a box marked McBride.

"What's this?" John had never spent a great deal of time with Larry. There was too much of an age difference between them. He passed him coming and going at the station, but he socialized with the guys who, like him, had joined the force more recently.

He respected Larry, though, knew him to be a dedicated, hardworking detective – the Colombo of the Keller Police Department.

"The one that haunts me," Larry said simply.

He didn't have to explain that statement; John knew what he meant. He'd seen the toll unsolved cases could take, especially if they were attached to a particularly heinous or gruesome crime. Larry was saying that this was one of those cases, one he hadn't been able to break no matter how hard he'd tried, and it kept him up at night. "You're handing it off to *me*?"

"I'm hoping you'll be willing to give it a fresh look, yes." In order to let go and walk away, the poor guy needed someone else to take over and keep trying. John understood where he was coming from but wasn't particularly excited about another difficult assignment. He was only thirty-four, but he'd been promoted to detective at thirty and already had a case of his own that troubled him, one that wasn't coming together. He feared he'd be Larry one day, standing at a younger detective's desk with his own case file and the same plea. "Tell me about it."

"It's the old McBride case."

John had seen the name on the box, but it was meaningless to him. He couldn't associate it with any crime he'd heard about. He stood up and removed the lid so that he could glance through the thick files inside. Larry had obviously done *a lot* of work.

"This is only one of the boxes." Larry winced as he scratched his neck, apparently afraid that such a disclosure would extinguish any interest John might have. "There are four more that go with it."

John replaced the lid. "Great," he said without bothering to cloak his sarcasm. Just wading through that amount of material would take forever. "How old is this case?"

"Old."

"*How* old?"

"Thirty-five years."

“You’ve only been on the force for what...forty?”

A nod confirmed the length of his police career. “It was my first big one.”

And it was still with him. John felt a wave of reluctance. If Larry couldn’t solve it, no one could. Larry was beyond dogmatic, which was partly why he had to quit. At sixty-three, he could have another couple of years in him, but he insisted he wouldn’t be able to do justice to his job if he couldn’t be entirely committed to it.

“I’m not sure I’m the best guy for this,” John said. “You want me to tackle something that happened before I was even born?”

The older man’s lips curved into a smile. John guessed he was thinking, “You’re just a punk kid,” or something similar. But that smile soon vanished and a more typical, stony expression fell into place. “I’ve kept an eye on you. You’d be the perfect guy.”

That was a compliment. Larry wasn’t generous with those, so John couldn’t help being flattered. There were older, more experienced detectives Larry could’ve approached. “I appreciate that, but...why don’t you give me a few of the more pertinent details?”

“Henry McBride was an oilman from Westlake.”

John whistled. “Westlake, huh?” He had no idea what Westlake had been like forty years ago, but these days it was one of the richest neighborhoods in America. People there had a median annual income of over half a mill. “Henry’s the victim?”

“Only one of them. He, his forty-six-year-old wife and his high-school aged son were shot and killed in the middle of the night during an attempted robbery.”

“The *entire family* was wiped out?”

He propped his hands, which had large blue veins tunneling under the skin, on his protruding hips. “‘Cept for one son, an older boy, named Edward, who was just about to graduate from Texas A&M.”

John sank into his seat. “Wow. Poor kid lost his parents and his brother in one fell swoop. No wonder this one haunts you.”

“That ain’t the reason,” he said. “I don’t feel a bit sorry for Ed McBride.”

John stiffened in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“I think *he* was the one behind it.”

“*The surviving son* shot and killed the rest of the family? His own mother, father and brother?”

“He wasn’t the trigger man, no. He had a solid alibi for that night, but he inherited everything – several million dollars, so he had motive.”

“And?”

“And there was just...something wrong with him, something missing.”

John stretched his neck to relieve the tension that came with sitting in front of a computer for too long. “Please tell me there’s evidence to support this.”

“Not a lot. That’s the problem.”

“So you’re making the assumption off of...what?”

"A cop's intuition more than anything else. But I always got the impression his grief wasn't real, that he was secretly glad they were gone."

John rocked back in his chair. "That's messed up. Where is he now?"

"Millcreek, forty-five minutes southwest of here. And you're not going to believe this..."

Intrigued in spite of himself, John leaned his elbows on the armrests of his chair and formed a steeple with his fingers. "Try me."

"He's the mayor."

"Of Millcreek."

"That's right."

Shit. That kind of guy wouldn't be easy to go after. This just kept getting better. "Has he been in any trouble since?"

"I know what you're thinking," Larry said.

"I'm thinking you might be wrong on this one," John responded, fully willing to admit it.

"Course you are. I'd be thinking the same thing. But his wife, Clara McBride, went missing twenty-three years ago."

"Was he implicated?"

"Nope. She disappeared in the middle of the night without a trace. No one's heard from her since, and yet everyone seems to believe that she ran off on her own."

"I see where you're going with this. You believe he killed her, as well."

“I do.”

“Is it your intuition that tells you that, too?”

“Not entirely. It’s the coincidence more than anything else. That two such unusual yet tragic events would happen to the same man defies all the statistics. The bastard believes he can get away with anything.”

“Has he ever been considered an official suspect – in either case?”

“Fraid not.”

“Then so far, he’s got reason.”

“Now you see why I can’t let it go.”

John puffed his cheeks as he let his breath seep out in a sigh. “What did the local police find when they investigated the wife’s disappearance?”

“I don’t believe they did much investigating.”

“Why not?”

“They believed him, didn’t dare question the word of such an upstanding citizen. As if functional citizens can’t commit murder! Obviously, the police don’t deal with enough real crime there in Millcreek. I took it all the way up to the chief, who told me they’d done what they could, that there was nothing to indicate a criminal act had occurred – no blood, no body, etc.”

“He suggested you mind your own business.”

“Essentially. But if you could find some piece of evidence I missed or somehow overlooked in this case –” he thumped the box “ – maybe you’ll be able to force them to do what they should’ve done from the beginning.”

The responsibility that settled on John's shoulders weighed as heavy as a hundred-pound backpack. But he couldn't refuse. Like Larry, he couldn't abide the thought of a man getting away with killing his own parents and brother, as well as his wife. If Ed McBride was guilty of those deaths, he was a very dangerous man. He could easily be guilty of other murders – or would be in the future. "I'll take a look," he promised.