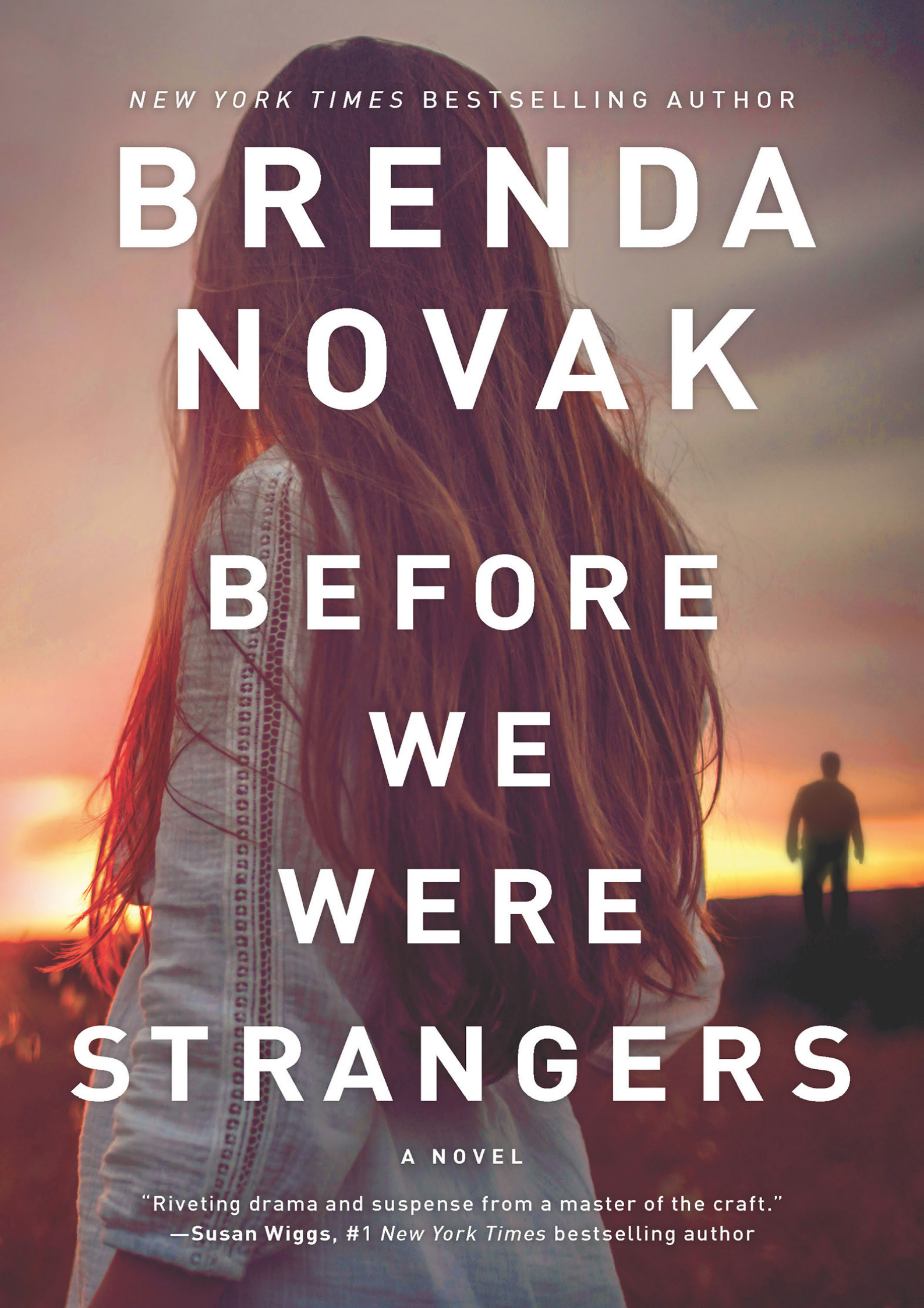




NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

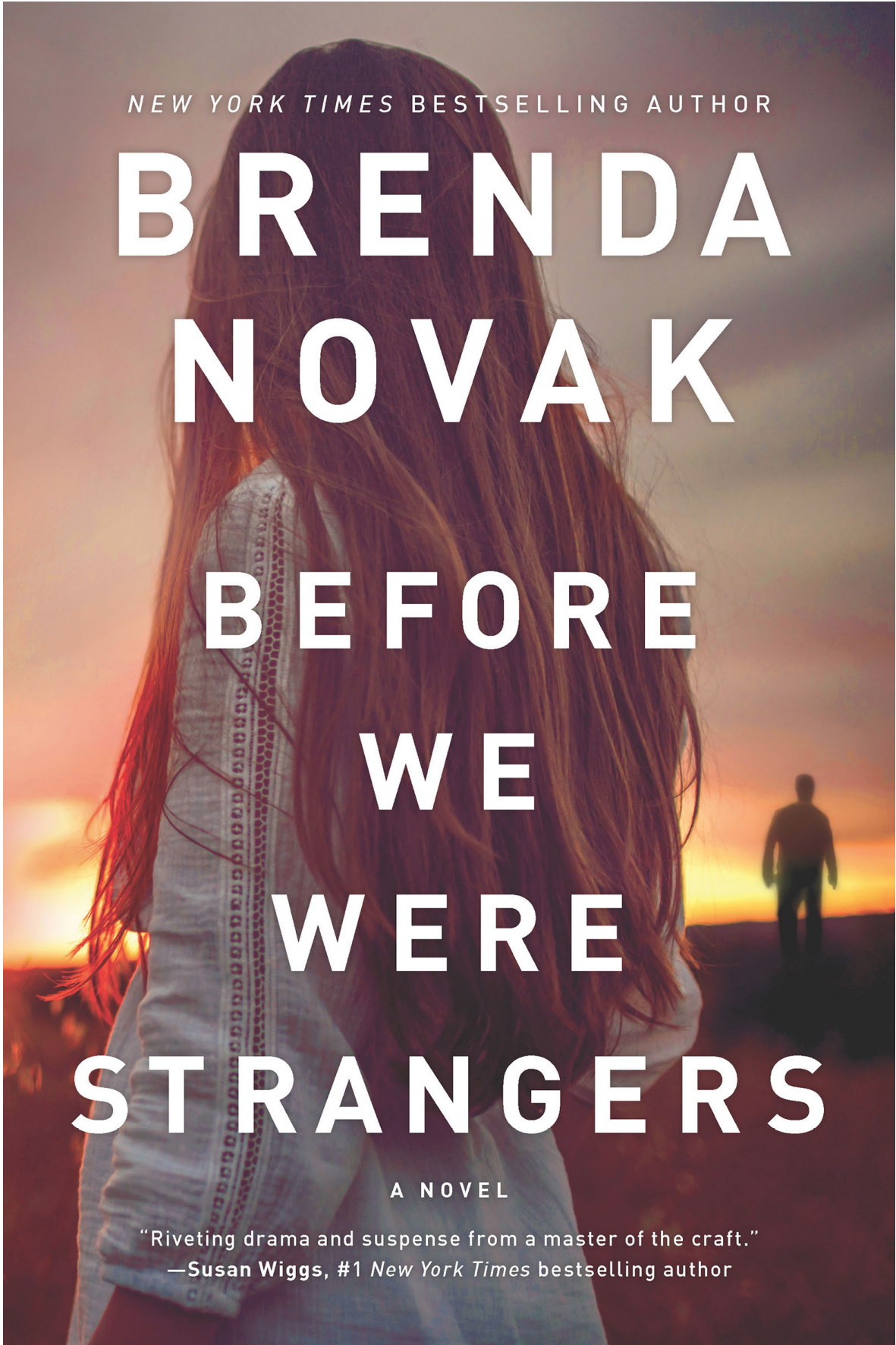
BRENDA
NOVAK

BEFORE
WE
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STRANGERS

A NOVEL

"Riveting drama and suspense from a master of the craft."

—Susan Wiggs, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author



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***Something happened to her mother that night.
Something no one wants to talk about. But she's
determined to uncover her family's dark secrets,
even if they bury her.***

Five-year-old Sloane McBride couldn't sleep that night. Her parents were arguing again, their harsh words heating the cool autumn air. And then there was that other sound—the ominous thump before all went quiet.

In the morning, her mother was gone.

The official story was that she left. Her loving, devoted mother! That hadn't sat any better at the time than it did when Sloane moved out at eighteen, anxious to leave her small Texas hometown in search of anywhere else. But not even a fresh start working as a model in New York could keep the nightmares at bay. Or her fears that the domineering father she grew up with wasn't just difficult—he was deadly.

Now another traumatic loss forces Sloane to realize she owes it to her mother to find out the truth, even if it means returning to a small town full of secrets and lies, a jilted ex-boyfriend, and a father and brother who'd rather see her silenced. But as Sloane starts digging into the past, the question isn't whether she can uncover what really happened that night...it's what will remain of her family if she does?

Praise for the novels of Brenda Novak

“Riveting drama and suspense from a master of the craft. I loved this twisty tale of friends, enemies, lovers, liars, and a family fractured by secrets. It’s the perfect read to cozy up to on a long winter night.”

—Susan Wiggs, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“Teeming with riveting, hold-your-breath suspense...Novak is at the top of her game with this gripping thriller. Prepare to be up all night!”

—Heather Gudenkauf, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Weight of Silence* and *Not a Sound*

“Novak’s fans will devour this one, and the relentlessly twisty plot will win her some new fans, as well. This is the kind of book best swallowed in one sitting: suspenseful, surprising, and 100 percent addictive.”

—Kimberly Belle, national bestselling author of *The Marriage Lie*

“What a book! *Before We Were Strangers* is dark and compelling, an excellent thriller with heart-pounding twists, full of secrets and lies, and all too real. This is Novak at her sweet and sinister best in a story that could be happening in the house next door. Who is telling the truth? You won’t know until the explosive end...”

—J.T. Ellison, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Tear Me Apart*

“Brenda Novak’s seamless plotting, emotional intensity, and true-to-life characters who jump off the page make her books completely satisfying. Novak is simply a great storyteller.”

—Allison Brennan, *New York Times* bestselling author

“The best romantic thriller I have read... Novak has a raw talent for bringing her novels to life. Realistic, suspenseful, and an edge of your seat romance that will have readers coming back for more.”

—*The San Francisco Book Review* on *The Secret Sister*

Also by Brenda Novak

RIGHT WHERE WE BELONG
UNTIL YOU LOVED ME
NO ONE BUT YOU
FINDING OUR FOREVER
THE SECRETS SHE KEPT
A WINTER WEDDING
THE SECRET SISTER
THIS HEART OF MINE
THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS
COME HOME TO ME
TAKE ME HOME FOR CHRISTMAS
HOME TO WHISKEY CREEK
WHEN SUMMER COMES
WHEN SNOW FALLS
WHEN LIGHTNING STRIKES
IN CLOSE
IN SECONDS
INSIDE
KILLER HEAT
BODY HEAT
WHITE HEAT
THE PERFECT MURDER
THE PERFECT LIAR
THE PERFECT COUPLE
WATCH ME
STOP ME
TRUST ME
DEAD RIGHT
DEAD GIVEAWAY
DEAD SILENCE
COLD FEET
TAKING THE HEAT
EVERY WAKING MOMENT

BEFORE WE WERE STRANGERS

BRENDA NOVAK



To Dana Kelly. Sometimes life surprises us in the most pleasant ways. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to get to know you. You are one of the most capable, generous, kindest individuals I know. So glad you're my friend.

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NOVAK](#)

CHAPTER ONE

*Bayside Cemetery
Queens, New York*

As far back as Sloane McBride could remember, she'd been told she was an ice queen. Even the people closest to her, *especially* the people closest to her, complained about her reserve. Her height, her physical appearance and her vocation didn't make her any more approachable, so what served her well professionally worked against her personally. She heard people mutter words like *stuck-up*, *aloof* or *distant*—and knew they were referring to her. No one seemed to understand that she hadn't *chosen* to be standoffish. That was simply a byproduct of what she'd been through.

She never talked about what she'd been through, however. If she could help it, she tried not to even *think* about her childhood. But she'd always known she'd have to go back to the small Texas town where she'd been raised eventually. And now that Clyde was gone, she didn't feel as though she could continue running from the past. When she lost him, she'd lost her emotional safe haven here in the Hamptons, her excuse for remaining in New York.

"God, I'm going to miss you," she whispered and squatted as gracefully as she could in her black dress and heels to rearrange some of the flowers decorating his grave. Everyone who'd known him had lost a friend, and his funeral, which had packed the church to overflowing, proved it. But no one would feel the loss of his presence more than she would. He'd taken her under his wing from almost the first moment they met, when she was barely eighteen, and he'd never tried to change her, never criticized her, either. He'd just accepted her for who she was. Whenever she withdrew from one of his many parties, he'd often come find her, but he wouldn't drag her back to the crowd she'd left. He'd simply squeeze her hand and say, "What are you thinking about?"

Sometimes she'd tell him and sometimes she wouldn't, but he never pressed her, regardless. That was one of the things she'd loved about him. He'd say, "Still waters run deep" or something else that gave her permission to be comfortable in her own skin, and then he'd return to his other friends, where he would continue to talk and laugh until late in the

night—simply winking at her if she happened to come into the room again.

She wasn't ready to leave the cemetery, to leave *him*. Forever was much too long a walk to take without him. But his five children and their spouses—those who had spouses, anyway—stood nearby, whispering among themselves under the pavilion, and she guessed from their expressions they were growing disgruntled by the fact that she was lingering so long. They'd never approved of her relationship with their father. At the funeral, she'd heard Camille, the youngest, murmur to a family friend, "They *had* to have been sleeping together. He was *so* devoted to her. I got the impression he loved her as much as me or any of the rest of us children."

"Of course they were sleeping together," the friend had agreed.

Sloane had been tempted to inform them otherwise. Instead, she'd slid her sunglasses up higher on the bridge of her nose and tried to ignore them, along with all the other people who were, no doubt, speculating about the same thing. Chances were they wouldn't believe her even if she told them, but she hadn't been the younger woman trying to take advantage of the rich older man. Yes, there *had* been twenty years between her and Clyde and, yes, they'd been very close. He'd been her friend, her confidant, her mentor, her modeling agent and even her landlord. She'd been living in the small cottage behind his mansion ever since he'd talked her into walking out of that coffee shop in Portland where she'd been working when he'd come to town for his ex-wife's funeral. But he'd never been Sloane's lover. He'd never even hinted at any romantic interest, and that wasn't what she'd felt for him, either.

The size of the lump in her throat threatened to choke her as she straightened. But she had a lot to do, couldn't focus on the loss or the pain. She'd survived thus far in life by always looking forward, never back, and the next few days would be busy. She had to pack up her belongings and move. Clyde's estate would go to his heirs, the same group of people who were waiting for her to leave. They'd given her notice months ago that they planned to put the place up for sale as soon as he died.

She gripped her purse a bit tighter with her left hand while turning so that she could wave with her right. Facing Clyde's family even for that brief moment wasn't easy. She could feel the gale-force wind of their disapproval pressing on her back, threatening to blow her right out of the cemetery.

Only a couple of them bothered to acknowledge her in return. Even then, the responses were half-hearted.

Doesn't matter, she told herself. Clyde had loved them, which meant she'd always treat them kindly. She'd also abide by their wishes regarding the house. Even though she'd earned plenty of money since coming to New York and had tried to talk him out of it, Clyde had left *her* part of his vast fortune. Not nearly as much as each of his kids but some. That was probably the reason they seemed to hate her even more since he died, but she was going to accept his gift just as he'd wanted her to. He'd said he was grateful for the hours of thoughtful conversation she'd provided over the years, the scuba diving trips they'd taken together to Hawaii, the atolls of the Maldives and Australia, the late-night laughter and all the hard things she'd had to do in order to care for him over the past fourteen months while he battled bladder cancer. None of his children had been able to help for longer than a couple of hours here and there. They were too busy with their own lives. They'd suggested hiring a nurse, but Sloane had refused to leave his care to a stranger in case he'd feel as if, now that he was no longer able-bodied, he was to be cast aside while the rest of the world moved on.

To avoid that, she'd given up her career. She'd hated knowing that his days were numbered, had wanted to spend as much time with him as possible. She probably wouldn't have worked for much longer, anyway. Modeling wasn't any fun without him. He was so good at shepherding her from one pinnacle in the high-fashion world to the next, she couldn't imagine continuing with someone else, couldn't bring herself to replace him. It was his intervention that had pulled her out of her desperate circumstances in the very beginning and had given her some semblance of a life—a life, as it turned out, that many people now envied. Representing brands like Prada, Gucci and Dolce & Gabbana certainly sparkled on the outside. Sloane was grateful for what she'd achieved, but in this moment, it felt as though that chapter of her life—the New York chapter—had come to a close with Clyde's death. So she'd decided, finally, to close the chapter she never had—the Millcreek chapter. The one she'd run away from so many years ago. She owed it to her mother.

And who could say? Maybe Sloane's instincts had been wrong all along. Maybe she owed it to her father and brother to find the truth, too, and dispel all suspicion.

Her phone rang as she climbed into her Jaguar. Caller ID revealed a Texas area code.

She frowned as she stared down at it.