

A man wearing a dark cowboy hat, a brown jacket over a blue and white striped shirt, and brown leather chaps is leaning against a wooden fence. The background is a dramatic sunset with orange and yellow clouds. The text is overlaid on the image.

TEXAS MONTGOMERY MAVERICKS

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Chapter One

Dr. Caroline Graham stood at the side of Angus Fitzgerald's casket, her oversized sunglasses protecting her eyes from an unrelenting Texas sun. Her gold charm bracelet clanked on the dark-grained wood as she rested her hand gently on the glossy lid. Her heart ached with a soul-deep sadness.

Until she'd moved to Whispering Springs, Texas eighteen months ago, she hadn't been close to her great-uncle Angus. She'd have never moved here without the encouragement—or should she say demand?—of his sister, Mamie Fitzgerald Bridges—her grandmother. Now she couldn't imagine not seeing his scruffy face and hearing his gruff voice every day.

"I'm sorry I didn't spend more time with you through the years, but I'm so glad we had these last months together. Mamie would have been here today if she could. She sends her love." She sniffed and wiped at the tears. "She said to tell you to prepare to get your ass kicked in checkers as soon as she joins you." She sniffed again. "I have to be honest, Uncle Angus. I hope that's a long time away. I'm not ready to lose her too."

A hand landed softly on her shoulder. She turned her head to look into a pair of blue Montgomery eyes. Kathryn Colleen Montgomery, aka KC, squeezed Caroline's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," KC said.

Caroline wiped her cheeks free of tears with a handkerchief. "Thanks, KC. You've been a good friend to Angus and me. I know how much he thought of you."

KC hugged her. "I loved the old coot."

Caroline laughed softly. "I know. So did I." She pulled out of KC's embrace to lay her hand on his casket again. She gave a sad chuckle. "I'll miss his cranky rants about all the politicians and—"

"Their thieving ways," KC finished.

Both women smiled.

"Yeah, I'll miss those too," KC said.

Caroline dabbed at her nose and then turned to lay a single long-stemmed orange rose on his coffin. "Rest in peace," she whispered. "You deserve it. Tell Great-Aunt Bernice I'm sorry I never got to meet her."

She stepped back and turned toward the gravediggers standing respectively to the side. "Thank you for waiting. I'm done."

The men moved in to finish the job of lowering the coffin into the ground and replacing the dirt.

"Are you sure we have to meet today?" Caroline asked as she and KC stepped away to give the gravediggers room to work. "Reading Uncle Angus's will so soon after his funeral seems so...I don't know...ghoulish."

KC nodded. "That was his request, but it doesn't have to be right this second. Take a break, go home and get some rest. You can come to my office later this afternoon if that works better for you."

She shook her head. "No, let's just get it done."

"Okay then. I'll meet you at the office."

KC turned, her leather-tooled cowboy boots grinding in the loose gravel near the grave site, her long skirt whipping around her ankles as she marched toward her battered truck.

After blowing one last kiss toward the grave of her late great-uncle who'd welcomed her with open arms, Caroline left the cemetery. The entire Montgomery clan stood in a cluster in the parking lot. She returned their waves as she drove past. Her stomach clenched when Travis Montgomery removed his hat and dipped his head toward her.

She'd been to the Bar M ranch for dinner on numerous occasions. The entire Montgomery family around a food-laden table with raucous conversations and sibling spats was an eye-opening experience.

The concept of a large family who enjoyed being together and weren't afraid of being affectionate in public was an enigma to her. She'd always wanted to be in a family like that, or thought she did. Not that she hadn't been raised in a loving home, because she had. Her parents, foreign missionaries, had worked in third-world countries through most of her life. Her maternal grandmother had raised her and loved her, but growing up, Caroline had wondered what it would be like to sit at a long table filled with family.

Dinners with the Montgomery clan always left her pondering if being a family member would feel different than being a visitor at that table. She'd never know.

The drive back to KC's law office in Whispering Springs took only fifteen minutes. She parked in front of a red-brick building sporting a gold plaque to the right of the door that identified the structure as *Montgomery and Montgomery, Attorneys-at-Law*.

She touched up her lipstick in the rearview mirror then slid from the car into the late July Texas heat.

A quick glance at the Bank of Whispering Springs clock and temperature sign made her utter an unladylike cuss word. One hundred and three, and it wasn't yet ten a.m. Everybody said things are bigger in Texas. She'd just never dreamed that would include the sweat rings under her arms.

Today would be another deadly day for heat strokes for sure. She feared the start of August tomorrow would only exacerbate the hot weather.

Dr. Lydia Henson, the other doctor in the Whispering Springs Medical Clinic, had assured Caroline the clinic could do without her today, even reiterating that at Angus's funeral. Caroline hated leaving her medical partner short-handed.

However, whether they fit her schedule or not, some things had to be dealt with today, like a will she really didn't want to hear.

Stepping into the law office reception area brought a sigh to her lips. The cool air was a welcome reprieve from the outside furnace heat.

Five more months and she was gone from this hellhole.

If it hadn't been for wanting to spend some time with Uncle Angus, she'd have never signed such an extended-temporary-practice contract here. The medical-staffing agency she used for her bookings usually found her employment where she filled in for vacationing or absent physicians from one to six months. This past two years had been her longest in a single locality since she'd finished her residency.

She had always been flexible about locations when considering work assignments, but after her first summer in Texas heat, she'd made sure her next employment contract was somewhere cooler. Come January, she was off to Montana for two months. It might be frozen tundra during the winters, but she was absolutely melting in the heat down here.

"Good morning," a chipper middle-age woman said from behind a desk. "May I help you?"

"Yes, please. I have an appointment with KC Montgomery."

"Oh, yes, Dr. Graham. I am so sorry about your loss. Angus Fitzgerald was quite a character. We'll all miss him."

Caroline acknowledged the expression of sympathy with a nod. "Thank you."

The receptionist gestured to the seating area. "Would you have a seat please? KC just got back to the office and said to tell you she needed about five minutes. Would you like some water? A Coke? I'd offer you coffee, but from the pink of your cheeks, I think you'd rather something colder. Am I right?"

Caroline smiled. She wouldn't miss the Texas heat, but she'd sure miss the Southern hospitality. "Something cold would be wonderful. Water, please."

"No problem. Have a seat. I'll be right back."

The woman returned with a bottle of spring water. "Here you go," she said holding out the green bottle.

Caroline gave her a grateful smile. "Thank you." She took the water with an internal sigh of relief, cracked the cap and took a long drink. The cold water stung as it slid down her dry throat and splashed into her empty stomach.

Caroline took a seat and pulled out her phone to check messages. Lydia had promised to text her if there were any problems that required Caroline to head back to the clinic before the afternoon slate of patients. No emergency texts, no urgent emails. No rescue from having to hear Angus's will.

"Caroline. C'mon back. Sorry to keep you waiting."

About the Author

Cynthia D'Alba was born and raised in a small Arkansas town. After being gone for a number of years, she's thrilled to be making her home back in Arkansas living in a vine-covered cottage on the banks of an eight-thousand acre lake. When she's not reading or writing or plotting, she's doorman for her two dogs, cook, housekeeper and chief bottle washer for her husband and slave to a noisy messy parrot. She loves to chat online with friends and fans. You can find her most days at www.cynthiadalba.com or www.everybodyneedsalittleromance.com. Follow her at www.facebook.com/AuthorCynthiaDALba, www.twitter.com/CynthiaDALba or email her at cynthiadalba@gmail.com.

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