

Dead Fall

The van wound its way along a dark road through the boreal forests of the Swan Hills of Alberta. The driver cursed and slammed on the brakes as the van's high beams caught the frozen image of a raccoon, ghost-like in the headlights, before it scurried out of the way and into the darkness. "Damn stupid country," growled Dr. Alberta Pateas, slowing her Honda even further as her heart raced at the sudden release of adrenaline. The Swan Hills were a haven to wildlife, including the dangerous grizzly bear. It made driving through the pitch-blackness of the night countryside hair raising. Even the high beams seemed to be forced back and dimmed by the looming, moonless darkness.

"Shit!" cursed Alberta, realizing that she had overshot the driveway that led to her father's homestead. *Why the hell does my family insist on living out here in the backwoods? And why the hell am I here?* It had seemed like a good idea when she'd left Toronto five days earlier. Her advances toward the woman that she loved had been turned down flat. After that, going home, after fourteen years away, just seemed very appealing. But now the memories of all the reasons she'd wanted to leave the back of beyond were starting to hit home again.

She carefully turned the van around on the dark road, traveled a few kilometres back the way she had come, and then turned down a narrow lane. Alberta winced as branches from the trees crowding each side of the dirt lane scraped along the side of her new Honda Odyssey. *I should have rented a truck in Edmonton,* she thought, as the wheels bounced through potholes and over roots. *The back of the moon would be easier to get to.*

Breaking out of the tunnel of trees, the van slipped through a gateway in a split rail fence and swung up in front of the massive log home; warm light beckoned from within. It was a beautiful home. Cut from huge red cedars at the turn of the century, it was a monument to the pioneer spirit and ingenuity of its builders. Alberta had forgotten just how impressive the Pateas home was. She stopped the van near the large, comfortable veranda, turned off the engine, and got out. She hesitated for a split second and then decided to leave her bags where they were. Best wait and see how they react to me coming home and how I'm going to react to being here.

The door opened as she walked up the steps, bathing her in golden light and the escaping warmth from the huge fieldstone fireplace that she knew dominated one wall of the living room.

"Aliko, this is you!" her father exclaimed in wonder, stepping out into the night.

"Yes. Tecanes, Baba," Alberta responded, surprised at the lump in her throat.

The huge man stepped forward and wrapped her in a bear hug. "You left as a lovely child, and now you have returned a beautiful woman."

"It's just a visit," Alberta protested quickly, but she did not pull back from the comforting arms of her father.

The old man nodded. "Yes, a visit. Tecanes, Aliko. Come, where are your bags? Your visit is not so short that you did not bring a bag," teased her father.

Alberta blushed. "No. I just left it in the van. Ahhh, thought I'd say hello first."

The knowing blue eyes looked out from under bushy white eyebrows. One arched up. "So, we have said hello. Do you think now you could bring your bags into your family home?" Her father smiled.

Alberta laughed and buried her face in his soft flannel shirt. Tears she was not aware that she had let escape dampened his shoulder. Her father smelt so good — a mixture of wood smoke, pine needles, and spice. "I...I missed you, Baba," she confessed, to her own surprise.

"Baba, who's there? Oh!"

Alberta looked over her father's shoulder to see a slight woman standing in the doorway wearing a housecoat. Who the hell is this?

"Ahhh, Dawn, this is my prodigal daughter come home for a visit at last. Aliko, this is Dawn Freeman."

Alberta slipped out of her father's arms as the slender woman moved forward. Letting her eye trail up the form, Alberta concluded that this stranger would have been very beautiful if she was not so painfully skinny. What the hell is she doing here? Freeman? Wonder if she is related to Crazy Trapper Freeman. Nah, couldn't be; he was as ugly as sin.

The small woman moved forward and offered Alberta her hand. "Hi, Aliko. Baba talks about you all the time. You are a legend around here. I am so excited to meet you at last," she babbled.

“Alberta,” the scientist stated tersely, and then, seeing the blank look on Dawn’s face, she went on to clarify, “I go by the name Alberta.”

Eyes widened in surprise and then sought clarification as Dawn looked past the dark, gruff woman to the warm, gentle father. “I give her a beautiful name and instead she chooses to call herself after a province.” He shrugged.

Dawn’s deep green eyes remained bewildered as they returned to look at the strong, still features of Georgeos Pateas’ daughter. They didn’t seem a bit alike. Baba was an open, gregarious, caring person, quick to smile and tease. Alberta was so controlled and stiff. I wonder if she can smile.

“Dawn, you go put the kettle on, sweetie, and I will help Alik with her visitor bags,” Georgeos suggested, breaking the sudden tension with the gentle teasing that was his way.

Alberta followed her father back to the van, feeling the cool night wrap around her as she moved away from the open doorway. Sweetie! Who the hell is Dawn Freeman? To her surprise she found that it was jealousy more than worry that gnawed at her gut. She hadn’t come back to share her father’s attentions.

“Who is she?” Alberta asked as the van door slid open at her keyed command. Her voice was sharper and more suspicious than she had intended.

Georgeos bent in and pulled out Alberta’s one soft-sided bag, hefting it with a frown. Alik traveled light, or she was not staying very long. “She was Trapper’s niece. She lives here now,” he answered vaguely. “You will like Mackenzie, I think,” he added as an afterthought.

“Mackenzie?”

“Dawn’s daughter.” Georgeos turned and walked toward the house. Alberta locked her van out of habit rather than necessity and followed her father up the steps and into the home to which she had never thought to return.

Georgeos put the bag down and turned to his daughter, dragging her into another embrace. “I missed you, Alik.”

Alberta hugged him back tightly. “I missed you too, Baba. It took me a long time to realize that.”

Georgeos laughed and, wrapping an arm around his beautiful daughter, led her into the living room to sit in the overstuffed leather furniture that formed a conversation nook around the huge fire. “You! So bright and you know nothing,” her father chided.

They talked of many things, letting the bonds that had been stretched and weakened over the years strengthen again. Dawn sat quietly listening to the father and daughter talk and later fetched a meal for them to share. Pita bread filled with chopped lamb marinated in a light, spicy oil came first, then baklava, oozing honey between layers of puff pastry and crushed walnuts.

After the meal, Georgeos stood and walked over to the sideboard, returning with a bottle of ouzo. He poured three glasses and added water, turning the clear, licorice-tasting alcohol milky. “To my daughter, who has come home for a visit and made her Baba very happy.” They tossed back the liquor, and Baba took his glass and threw it into the fireplace, where it shattered against the stone and sent crystals of glass raining into the glowing embers below. Dawn laughed and threw her glass in, too. Alberta started, having forgotten the ancient tradition. After a second’s hesitation, she smashed her glass into the fireplace with the others. *So a lesser toast may never be had from this glass, she toasted silently. A hell of a waste of good glasses.*

“So, where are Nick and Ari?” she asked, as she curled into the corner of the couch. The food, liquor, and good company had weakened some of the defensive walls that she had erected over the years.

“Eh! Have you been away so long that you have forgotten your family runs a cattle ranch? They are on the lower ranges, checking on the spring calving. We should have about a hundred head freshening this spring,” bragged Georgeos, as he leaned back in the leather of his chair contentedly.

“How many head are you wintering over these days?”

“About a thousand, but we are far more diversified now. Your brother Ari owns a small oil field over in the southeast sector, and Nick has started a winter resort for those who wish to cross country ski, dog sled, or snowmobile. We are doing very well.” He laughed. “Not like the old days, Alberta.”

Alberta smiled, but the light did not reach her eyes. She was not comfortable with the past. “I’m glad my brothers are making a go of it with you,” she responded guardedly, the defensive walls snapping back into place. She looked at her watch. “It’s late. I’d better get to bed before I fall asleep here. I’ll head up to my room.” She stood and moved over to kiss her father good night.

Georgeos looked uncomfortable. “Actually, Alberta, Dawn and Mackenzie share your old room.”

“Oh.”

“Ahh, you can use the one next to it,” he offered hastily.

"Sure." Alberta smiled awkwardly, trying to hide her hurt and surprise. *He gave Dawn my room. Well, what do you expect, Alberta? You haven't been home in fourteen years.*

"I'll go and see about towels and things," Dawn muttered, making a quick retreat.

Alberta watched her go and then turned thoughtful eyes on her father. He smiled but offered no explanation. Alberta picked up her bag and headed up the polished oak stairs to her newly appointed room. She found Dawn making up her bed.

If you make the bed, you have to lie in it. The old saying came back, and a sexy smile curled the corner of Alberta's mouth as she looked at the cute backside straightening an errant sheet. Alberta was startled at her reaction. What was she doing appreciating another woman when she had just been rejected by the woman that she thought she loved? *I'm more tired than I thought.*

She walked up behind Dawn. "Thanks."

The small woman gasped, spun around, slammed into Alberta's chest, and then, weak-kneed from the contact and shock, sat down on the bed.

"Ahhh, you scared me!" Dawn gasped. A dark eyebrow rose. *Her father does that, too,* Dawn noted.

"Sorry. I didn't think I needed to knock."

Dawn blushed and slipped off the bed and around Alberta. "No, no, of course you don't. You just move very quietly, like a cougar." The eyebrow rose again. "I've put out towels. We share a bath...but you know that. I'll warn Mackenzie, that's my daughter, that you are here and not to monopolize the bathroom." *I'm rambling,* Dawn realized and snapped her mouth shut.

Alberta said nothing; she just nodded slowly and let her amazingly blue eyes search deeply into the forest green eyes that looked back at her. The eyes slid away. "Well, good night," Dawn murmured, making a quick exit.

"Good night," Alberta muttered after the retreating figure. Alberta washed, slipped into her silk pajamas, and got into bed. Recalling the feel of Dawn's small body against her chest, Alberta smiled. *Whoever Dawn Freeman is, she is a cute little thing.*

It was a perfect dream, and as Alberta felt herself rising toward consciousness, she fought to linger a few seconds longer. In her dream, Janet was naked beside her in bed. Her hand gently stroked Alberta's cheek. Soft, warm fingers...

Alberta's eyes snapped open as realization hit; they made contact with a pair of eyes just as blue as her own and twice as startling because they stared out from a face the tawny red of a North American Indian.

The girl pulled her hand back, her eyes getting bigger with surprise as she silently looked back at the woman in bed. "Who are you?" Alberta smiled. When there was no answer, Alberta frowned and rolled over and sat up. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, then focused them again on the girl. She looked like she might be around eleven or twelve. A bit old to be so shy that she was tongue-tied. Alberta tried again. "Are you going to tell me who you are, or has the cat got your tongue?"

"She is my daughter," came the response from the other side of the room. Alberta looked over to see Dawn standing by the bathroom door. "She doesn't talk. Mackenzie, this is Baba's daughter Aliko, Dr. Alberta Pateas."

Alberta looked at the girl in surprise. The child smiled and reached out to touch the short, curly hair that hung over Alberta's forehead. Alberta slowly reached her hand out and touched the end of Mackenzie's nose with her fingertip. The girl giggled and blushed.

"Come on, Mackenzie, you shouldn't be in here disturbing Alberta. Come away now and go and see if Baba is downstairs yet, waiting for his breakfast." The girl looked at her mom, then back at Alberta and then, smiling, she ran off to do as her mother had asked.

Alberta looked at Dawn. She wore worn blue jeans and an Edmonton Eskimos football jersey. Her hair was the colour of white gold, and it fluffed playfully around her delicate features. *She is a good looker, that's for sure.* "Has she never spoken?"

Dawn shook her head. "Not since she was three."

"What happened?"

The question caused the open face to close and the bright green eyes to turn wary. "I don't know."

You're lying, Alberta thought but wisely said nothing.