

Dead Duck

A few months later, the Pateas and Williams families found themselves together again. Aliki had invited them, on her father's behalf, to visit the Pateas ranch in Alberta. Baba wanted to meet Robbie and introduce her to her half brothers. It had taken some doing to organize everyone's schedule and to work out logistics but at last they were on their way.

Janet Williams sighed and then smiled when Dawn Freeman reached over and poked her in the ribs. They exchanged a knowing look as they settled back to wait for their Toronto plane to go through its landing pattern for the airport in Edmonton, Alberta. Across from them sat their partners, the famous actress and director, Robbie Williams, and her half-sister and forensic anthropologist, Dr. Aliki "Alberta" Pateas. These two women did not look relaxed. They looked stiff and stormy.

It had been difficult in the extreme to get the two stubborn women to come to an agreement about the flight, and it had resulted in some irritation of an already sore subject. The root of the problem was money. Dr. Aliki Pateas had been seconded from the RCMP to the Toronto forensic labs and earned a good middle class income. Her partner, Dawn Freeman, had written the best-seller, *Growing Up Free*, and had followed it up with the award-winning suspense thriller, *The Fire Clown*, for which she had also sold the movie rights. Her talent and the money her uncle had left her had made her a very wealthy woman. And Janet and Robbie Williams were worth millions. In short, three out of the four could afford first-class seats; Aliki hadn't felt that she could. It was awkward in the extreme.

"You two sit in first class, and Dawn and I will fly economy," Aliki had insisted.

"Oh, great! Just what I need is for the press to find out I fly first class while my sister sits in the back. No way!"

Aliki shrugged. "Then buy economy seats."

"I can't," Robbie had mumbled, looking awkward.

"Why not?" Aliki crossed her arms over her chest, looking stubborn.

"Because I'm an actor, and it would cause a small riot," growled Robbie, not liking at all that she had to admit that her fans were a problem. "I have to travel as a VIP."

Enjoying her sister squirming, Aliki teased with a smile, "Ooh, aren't we something special!"

Partly in fun and partly in annoyance, Robbie threatened, "I'm going to bop you."

Janet had intervened, recognizing her T-Rob's famous temper rising to the surface. "I think I see a solution here. Aliki is being very sensible. She has responsibilities to Dawn and Mac and can't be throwing her money around on unnecessary expenses. On the other hand, Robbie, you are being sensible, too; you can't just step out into the public. You need to go through VIP clearance, and you need to have security. Seeing as Aliki is a trained RCMP officer, she can be your bodyguard, and we can solve the logistics problem and get you protection at the same time. Aliki, you can pay for your and Dawn's tickets, and Robbie's office will upgrade them to first class so that you can be near her to provide security."

The two sisters stared at each other grumpily, neither one willing to be the first to agree to this proposal. "That's a great idea." Dawn got up and went over to wrap an arm around her stubborn partner. "Isn't it, Aliki?" She rubbed her lover's back to ease some of the tension.

"Robbie?" Janet's voice held a hint of a warning, as did the look she gave her wife.

Robbie sighed in defeat. Her half-sister she was willing to take on, but not her wife. If Janet wanted it, Janet got it. "Yeah, it would make it easier to have Aliki as my security. Then we wouldn't be stuck with some Rambo type standing outside our bedroom door."

"I can live with that, if you trust me to do the job," Aliki agreed, throwing in her own towel to please Dawn.

"Good, then it's settled," Janet said lightly, ignoring the fact that it would have taken a chainsaw to cut the tension in Aliki's living room.

That had been a month ago, and the truce was holding up under great strain.

Nor was that Janet's only worry. Behind her she could hear the quiet murmurs of her stepdaughter, Ryan, and Dawn's adopted daughter, Mac. The young teens had not seen each other for several months, and they had a lot to catch up on. Sooner or later, Janet was going to have to tell Robbie that there was something up.

While Robbie was away on business, the Bartlett School for the Gifted had called to tell Janet that Ryan had been cutting classes on a regular basis and Lou down at the garage had casually mentioned that Ryan was filling up the car twice a week now. Where was Ryan going? At first, Janet had been annoyed more than angry and had meant to have Robbie talk to Ryan as soon as she returned from her business trip to Britain. But just before they left, Janet had found out from Eiffel, who worked at Bartlett's only bank, that Ryan had withdrawn five thousand dollars from her account.

Eiffel had wondered innocently whether Ryan was going south for March Break, like so many teens did in their last years of high school. Janet had answered vaguely, pretending to be preoccupied with her banking statement. What the hell was Ryan up to? She needed to talk to Robbie, but now was not a good time. Robbie had been delayed with last-minute filming issues in Britain, and she had just made it back in time to get organized for the flight out west. At long last, Robbie was going to meet the father that she and Aliko shared. It was not a good time to burden T-Rob with a mystery involving her daughter. She was hyper enough already. Moreover, Robbie wasn't always a rational thinker when it came to Ryan. It would be better to find a few minutes while they were out west and talk to Robbie first before they approached Ryan.

A tug on Janet's sleeve got her attention, and she looked down into the face of her other daughter, who would be celebrating her fourth birthday during their visit. "Mommy, are we landed yet?"

"No, sweetheart, but we will be soon."

"I got to go," Reb announced loudly.

Janet looked up at the flight attendant. "There's time, if you are quick," the man responded with a smile before being asked.

"I'll take her." Robbie unfastened her seatbelt and got up to release Reb from hers.

Janet smiled at the beautiful woman who was her wife and soulmate. "Thanks, hon."

Robbie gave her a wink and then focused on Reb's biological emergency. "Come on, Reb. You have to be quick because the plane can't land until everyone is in their seat."

Reb followed the tall actress down the aisle to the head, at the back of the first-class section.

"I go by myself," the determined child said when Robbie unlatched the door for her.

"Okay, kid. But it doesn't flush like the one at home."

"I know. It a plane."

Reb stepped into the small washroom, and Robbie closed the door and leaned against it to keep it shut.

In a few minutes, Robbie heard the toilet flush, and a little while later it flushed again. "Reb?"

"I finished now, Obbie," came a voice with a giggle.

Robbie opened the door to look down on her beaming daughter. "Obbie, the toilet goes VOOM!"

Robbie laughed. "Yeah, the water is sucked out under pressure, Reb. It's because the air pressure in the plane varies as we go up and down. Pressure is what makes the water run down the pipes. What is that smell?"

Reb stepped out and waited for her Obbie to close the door once again. "I try the purfoom. It was by the sink."

Robbie sniffed. "I think you picked the aftershave lotion. Next time, use a spot behind each ear, not half the bottle in your hair. You didn't drink any, did you?"

"No. Mommy said I can't eat or drink anything without asking," Reb said matter-of-factly as they made their way back down the aisle.

"Good. That stuff would really make you sick. Kid, you reek! I'm glad you're sitting by your mommy," teased Robbie, as she fastened her little daughter into her seat again. "She tried out the aftershave," Robbie explained when she saw her wife's nose wrinkle.

"Olives!" muttered Janet, smiling down at her daughter.

"The toilet has a vacuum 'cause it don't have pressure, so it goes VOOM," Reb explained.

While Robbie was close, Janet took the opportunity to whisper in her ear, "Talk to your sister. The two of you look like you're on the way to the executioner, not to your brother's wedding and to visit your father."

Robbie pulled a face, then smiled into Janet's beautiful deep green eyes. They had been married over two years, but being close to Janet still took Robbie's breath away. The director reluctantly returned to her own seat and buckled in to listen to the landing instructions.

Robbie considered how she could open up a conversation with her half-sister. On her way out west for her half-brother's wedding and to meet her biological father for the first time, she felt a mixture of excitement, curiosity, and downright fear at the prospect. What if her father didn't like her? Aliki had been pretty good about the discovery, but what about the two half-brothers that she was yet to meet?

Robbie searched for something to say. It wasn't easy making small talk. Funny, she never found it hard to talk to Janet, but then her wife was someone very special. "I'm sorry about this," she found herself saying with some embarrassment.

"About what?" Aliki asked, looking up in surprise.

"About putting the family through all this. Sometimes I feel like someone who has some horribly contagious disease and must be isolated from the rest of humanity."

Serious, intelligent eyes looked at her thoughtfully. "It's okay. I was a bit difficult about it, too. I'm sorry. I guess my ego was feeling threatened, and I wasn't thinking that traveling could put you in harm's way. Dawn and I talked, and we're okay about the flying arrangement now."

"Before I married I didn't care about the potential dangers; I practically courted trouble. Most fans are really nice people, but there is always that dangerous fringe. I worry about my family all the time. It was my celebrity that resulted in our kids being kidnapped. Reb's gotten over it quickly, but Ryan still gets nightmares now and again. Not that she'd ever admit it," Robbie said sadly. Aliki remained quiet, allowing Robbie to go on in her own faltering way.

Robbie shifted in her seat. "Reb wears her emotions up front. You know when she is happy or sad. It's written all over her face. If she's upset, she howls and gets it out of her system. For a young kid, she's really comfortable in her skin." Her long fingers nervously moved back and forth across the control panel on the arm of the chair.

It had been Dawn who had pointed out to Aliki that Robbie had nervous hand movements when she was upset. There was more her sister had to share. Aliki smiled and nodded, waiting for Robbie to go on.

"Ryan holds everything in and stewes about it. That's my fault for not being there for her. She has always had to take care of herself. Something is bothering her right now. I don't know...maybe because I've been away a lot. She's got something on her mind, and she's not sharing."

Aliki shrugged, not sure what to say to relieve her sister's anxiety. "It could be nothing, Robbie. Maybe she has a boyfriend and is daydreaming about him."

"Ha! Wait until Mac goes out on her first date. I was a basket case when some guy picked Ryan up to go to the community centre dance. It was the longest four hours of my life."

Aliki laughed, and Robbie smiled and blushed. "You wait. You won't be laughing for long," she warned.

Aliki considered this revelation. "I imagine I'll be a little overprotective. I've seen firsthand what happens to nice girls who fall into bad situations," Aliki murmured sadly.

Seeing the sorrow in her sister's eyes, Robbie wisely didn't ask questions. Aliki's career as a forensic anthropologist brought her into contact with violent death on a regular basis. What would it be like to live with the memories of what she had seen?

"Tell me more about my family," Robbie said, changing the subject.

Aliki smiled. Robbie had often asked the same question since her discovery that Nick Pateas, Aliki's father, was her own biological father as well. "Dad is really excited about meeting you. Everyone calls him Baba. It is a Greek word for dad. He's very outgoing and social and is well liked and respected in the community. He's strict, though, kind of old fashioned. I would never have told him about my orientation. It's probably one of the reasons that I didn't go home for many years."

"What changed?" Robbie asked, smiling her thanks at the flight attendant who had just brought them an assortment of sweets in preparation for the change in pressure while landing. The guy had the look of a star-struck fan. Robbie had worried all during the flight that he might say something in front of her sister that Aliki would tease her about later.

“Janet impacted my life for one thing. She encouraged me to go home and deal with some of the ghosts of my childhood. When I got there...well, Baba had already worked it out for himself. He was good about it. He doesn't like it, but he was accepting of me. I think part of it was that I fell in love with Dawn. Baba had sort of adopted Dawn and Mac before I ever got there.”

“They met when Dawn's uncle and her brother were killed, right?” asked Robbie, as she sucked on a sweet.

“After the plane crash, Dawn and Mac were left stranded up at the Freeman cabin. They'd have starved up there if Dawn hadn't walked the two of them out. How she did it, I'll never know. That's really wild country, but Dawn grew up in the Canadian bush and she really knows her stuff. She made her way to the ranch. They were half starved and exhausted. Baba took them in, and Dawn sort of became his housekeeper.”

“He must miss Dawn and Mac.”

“Yeah, a lot, but since Ari got engaged, Baba has Ari's fiancée, Joan, in his life. Since their wedding date was originally over a year ago, Joan has been around a while for Baba to spoil.”

Robbie nodded. She knew that Aliki had had three brothers. Yirgos, the oldest, had committed suicide after his Salish mistress had died. MacKenzie, the child that Aliki and Dawn now raised as their own, was the child of that union.

There were also the twins, Ari and Nick, Aliki's younger brothers, whom she had raised with Baba after the untimely death of their mother.

Robbie's hands moved nervously over the arm of her seat as she fretted about how her natural father and half-brothers would react to her.

Being famous had more disadvantages than advantages. Her family would undoubtedly have heard all the media gossip about her life. Even if they had not known before, once word got out she was visiting, people would go out of their way to spread the stories.

Robbie leaned back and considered what they might know. They would have heard about her arrest and trial for the murder of Philip Williams and how Aliki and Janet had proved her innocent. The world knew that. It had been sensational front-page news, as had been the revelation of her gay marriage to Janet.

They had probably heard about her wild years, too — the parties, the substance abuse, the lovers... Robbie cringed with embarrassment. She wished she could have those years back to relive better. Aliki had said her father was conservative. How would he feel about a daughter like her?

The Air Canada plane soared cross the nation. Two thousand kilometres had separated her from her natural father. Two thousand kilometres and a lifetime.