

The Birdman's Daughter Excerpt

April 2006

Ever since Karen could remember, her father's life – and thus the life of his family – had revolved around adding birds to his list. By the time she was six, Karen could name over a hundred different types of birds. She rattled off genus species names the way other children talked about favorite cartoon characters. Instead of commercial jingles, bird calls stuck in her head, and played over and over again. To this day, when she heard an Olive-sided Flycatcher, she could remember the Spring morning when she'd first identified it on her own, and been lavished with praise by her too-often-distracted father.

“He'd just spotted the Manakin when he keeled over right there in the jungle.” her mother, Sara, explained as they made their way from her father's hospital room to the cafeteria. “Allen Welch was with him, and he's the one who called me. He apologized, but said he had no idea who else to contact.”

Karen shook her head, amazed. “How did you ever get him home?”

“The insurance paid for an air ambulance. All those years with Mobil Oil were worth something after all.” Martin Engel had spent his entire career as a petroleum engineer with Mobil Oil Company. He always told people he kept the job for the benefits. They assumed he meant health insurance and a pension, but his family knew the chief benefit for him was the opportunity to travel all over the world, adding birds to his list.

They reached the cafeteria. “I'll get the coffee, you sit,” Sara said, and headed for the coffee machine.

Karen sank into a molded plastic chair and checked her watch. Eleven a.m. here in Texas. Only ten in Colorado. Tom and Matt would be at a job site by now and Casey was in math class – she hoped.

“Here you go.” Her mother set a cardboard cup full of coffee in front of her and settled into the chair across the table. “How are Tom and the boys?”

“They're fine. This is always a busy time of year for us, of course, but Matt's been a terrific help, and we've hired some new workers.” Tom and Karen owned Blue Spruce Landscaping. This past year, their oldest son, Matt, had begun working for them full time. “Did I tell you Matt's signed up for classes at Red Rocks Community College this fall? He wants to study landscaping.”

“And he'll be great at it, I'm sure.” She sipped her coffee. “What about Casey? What's he up to these days?”

Karen's stomach tightened as she thought of her youngest son. “Oh, you know Casey. Charming and sweet and completely unmotivated.” She made a face. “He's failing two classes this semester. I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever get him out of high school.”

“He takes after his Uncle Del.” Sara's smile was fond, but her words made Karen shudder.

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No, Del had a black heart, and he was an expert at taking advantage of others. But Karen knew it was no use arguing with her mother. “If Del’s so good, maybe he should be the one looking after Dad,” she said.

Her mother frowned at her. “You know your father and Del don’t get along. Besides, for all his good qualities, Del isn’t the most responsible man in the world.”

Any other time, Karen might have laughed. Saying her brother wasn’t responsible was like saying the Rocky Mountains weren’t steep.

She checked her watch again. Eleven-twenty. At home she’d be making the last calls on her morning’s to-do list. Here, there was no to-do list, just this sense of too much to handle. Too many hours where she didn’t know what lay ahead. Too many things she had no control over. “Do you think he’s ready yet?” she asked.

Her mother stood. “He probably is. I’ll help you get him in the car. Del said he’d meet you at the house to help get him inside, but after that, you’re on your own.”

“Right.” After all, she was Karen, the oldest daughter. The dependable one.

The one with ‘sucker’ written right across her forehead.