

A Sweet Song

by Barbara Elizabeth Walsh

“NOTHING WILL EVER be the same again,” Ally whispered.

She sank slowly into her father’s favorite chair and stared at the small American flag sticking out of the pencil cup holder on his desk. It was the flag Chief Russell had given her after the funeral last summer, when he hugged her and told her how proud the Police Department was of her dad’s work for them. His tears had warmed Ally’s cheek; her own tears were still frozen insides her heart.

It wasn’t fair, Ally thought, frowning. Dad was young and had never been sick. Why had his heart suddenly stopped?

Ally curled herself up in the worn leather chair and looked at her father’s picture on the bookcase. It was one of her favorite shots. Dad was sitting in the middle of a stream, soaking wet but grinning proudly as he held his binoculars over his head and out of harm’s way.

Ally smiled. “I miss you, Dad,” she said softly.

She felt a hand smoothing her hair and glanced up. Mom was holding gardening gloves, a small shovel, and a floppy-brimmed hat. She was smiling brightly, but her eyes had that worried look.

“Why don’t you come outside with me, Ally?” her mother asked. “The birds are nesting in the woods, and they sound so cheerful. By

this time last year you’d already taken dozens of pictures.”

But her mother must know bird-watching wouldn’t be the same this year. How could it be? Ally wondered. Ever since she could remember she and Dad had been a team, searching the woods behind the house each weekend for a glimpse of the special wood warbler.

Nodding, Ally reached up and wiped a smudge of dirt from her mother’s chin. “I’ll be out in a while, I promise,” she answered.

After her mother left, Ally reached for the first photo album she and Dad had put together. On the cover a tiny bird, the color of an overripe orange, with blue-gray wings and piercing black eyes peered out of the photo her father had clipped from a local newspaper. Ally smiled, remembering the excited look on his face when he first showed her the pretty bird.

“I can’t believe someone spotted this little guy way up here in New Jersey,” he’d said, his eyes sparkling. “Wood warblers are usually found in southern swamplands, not this far north.”

“But why did the warbler make a nest in that mailbox, Dad?” she had asked.

“Because that’s what they do. They take over ready-made holes they can stuff with moss, like that mailbox or a birdhouse or



maybe a hole in the stump of a tree. You know, Ally, I bet if we search real hard, we'll see this little guy *together* someday."

Ally leaned her head back and closed her eyes, letting her mind wander. She loved thinking about the times she and Dad had spent searching the woods for the little bird. They'd never spotted the warbler, but her father had an amazing way of making each outing seem special. He was her best buddy, and when they were together Ally felt

comfortable, as she did when she had on her favorite blue fleece sweatshirt.

If only I could get that good feeling back, she thought, sighing.

Ally opened her eyes and stared at the colorful bird. Suddenly she knew exactly what she had to do.

Grabbing the little flag, she placed her camera around her neck and hurried outside. She found her mother in the backyard weeding the flower bed, where dozens of pretty yellow



daffodils stood straight like guardians lining the woods.

Ally stuck her father's flag between the flowers. "Please let me see the warbler," she murmured to herself.

"How about if I come along with you?" her mother offered, giving Ally a hug. "I can finish my gardening later."

It wouldn't be the same if Mom tagged along, Ally thought. Still, I don't want to hurt her feelings. . . .

Ally smiled, but shook her head. "You remember how Dad and I used to complain that the path was almost too steep for us."

Ally looked into her mother's eyes and knew she understood.

She gave Mom a kiss, then set off into the woods. When she reached the stream, she stopped and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

Some things never change, Ally thought as the familiar smells of fresh earth and mushrooms rose up to greet her. Beyond the stream, she noticed the jack-in-the-pulpits were already poking their heads toward the sunlight filtering down through the branches.

Quickening her pace, Ally hurried to the rock under the old pine tree where she and

Dad used to sit and eat lunch. She sat on it and tilted her face toward the sun. Overhead the sky was filled with birds busily darting down to gather twigs, dried grass, and bits of moss to place in their nests. Their sweet songs echoed throughout the woods, and before long Ally felt as though she was back where she belonged.

Raising her arms above her head, Ally clasped her hands together and stretched tall, feeling content for the first time in a long while. She could almost hear her father's laughter in the gentle breeze as she listened for the *sweet-sweet-sweet* song of the special bird.

I *know* Dad will send the warbler to me. And I won't stop searching until I spot it, she promised herself, settling comfortably on the rock.

Time passed pleasantly as Ally waited. She took photos of two robins having a tug of war over a worm. She counted the *tap-tap-taps* of a woodpecker drilling a hole in a nearby tree. Then she traced her name in the dirt with the toe of her sneaker, over and again, until each letter was an inch deep.

All too soon the sun disappeared behind thick gray

clouds, and Ally rubbed her arms against the chill. Determined to start out earlier the next morning, she was about to head home, when suddenly a ringing birdsong, prettier than any she had heard before, floated down to her. An excited feeling bubbled up inside of Ally as she searched the sky.

Sweet-sweet-sweet, she heard once more as a flash of fiery orange swooped down and perched on a nearby branch.

For a moment Ally couldn't believe her eyes, but it was true. "I knew it!" she exclaimed, leaping to her feet.

The tiny wood warbler just sat there, tilting its head from side to side, as if it were waiting for something.

Ally blinked back tears. "Thanks, Dad," she whispered, slowly lifting her camera and taking careful aim.

Things will be different without Dad, she thought, snapping three perfect shots. I'll always miss our times together, but I feel better now.

Then, smiling at the pretty bird, Ally called out, "You wait right here while I get Mom." 🐜

