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KILL YOUR DARLINGS

by

Natalie Kinkade

John James Audubon woke to the sound of a mountain chickadee singing her distinctive song somewhere nearby. He blinked cold dew from his eyelashes. He did not quite speak the language of the mountain chickadee, but its dialect was similar enough to that of the black-capped chickadee for him to understand the essence of the conversation: she was telling a friend about her plans to renovate her nest.

Audubon extricated himself from his makeshift bed on the ground, straightened his coonskin cap, and tucked his gun under one arm.

“Good morning,” he whistled. The chickadee language always sounded so melancholy to him; even a simple greeting took on a kind of sadness.

“Hello!” replied the chickadee. “Join us. We’re just south of the clearing, in an elm tree.”

Audubon flattened a path of asters in his stride. The rising sun cast a peachy glow over the scene, reflecting off of the barrel of his gun. He adjusted the weapon before walking into the woods, his anticipation growing with each step, fully alert, not even noticing the numbness in his toes. A gentle breeze from the northwest played in his hair. He had yet to paint the mountain chickadee.

The birds froze as he approached. "It's all right, friend," he sang. "It's me."

Upon catching sight of Audubon, one of the pair flew away (so easy, so graceful), but the other bird, the singer, relaxed. She was a lovely thing, with a soft, oat-colored underbelly, striking blue-gray tail feathers, and a large, intelligent, black and white head.

"Your chickadee is wonderful," she said. She looked at him curiously. "Are you—would you happen to be John James Audubon?"

Audubon smiled, flattered to be recognized so far away from home. He felt it was as it should be. "Yes," he whistled. Identifying himself may have been a slight risk, but he had to find out how the little bird had heard of him, what she knew of his illustrious adventures.

"I have a message from your son," sang the chickadee. "He said to look for a Frenchman pretending to be Daniel Boone who could sing chickadee."

Her mocking tone annoyed Audubon. "Well, what's the message?" he asked.

"He just wants you to come home," the little songbird replied. "He says that you have ignored his last thirty-two letters, so he had to find another way to get the message to you. He says his mother misses you and needs you to come back home now to support the family."

Audubon laughed with sincere puzzlement. "But it's November! If I came home now I would miss all the winter birds," he said, as if explaining something very obvious to someone very obtuse.

Before the chickadee could reply, she was lying on the forest floor with a bullet hole in her left wing.

Audubon gathered her up in his hands with tender care. She looked at him with silent reproach as he stabbed her through her

heart with his pocket knife. He could do it without spilling much blood on her breast. His shoulder smarted slightly from the kick of his gun. Working quickly, he glued strewn feathers back into place, strung fine wires through her wings, and posed her still-warm body in her never-to-be-renovated nest before rigor mortis set in. She really was a gorgeous little thing.

He whistled a chickadee song as he rendered the finest taxonomic details of her plumage in watercolors, taking pains to capture the inquisitiveness of her face. She looked almost alive.