Death of a Dove

Also by Eleanor Kuhns

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Death of a Dove

By

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Praise for The Long Shadow of Murder

Kuhns' suspenseful historical whodunit features fast-paced action, but it also compellingly addresses important topics with sensitivity and depth, including post-traumatic stress disorder, war, infidelity, religion, and sexual assault. These elements effectively add to the plot without overwhelming it. Kuhns also includes well-researched facts about the American Revolutionary War, the Shaker community, and traditions of the era. The novel provides details about the Battle of Minisink, as well, which is vital to a large portion of the plot and especially important to the development of Shaker Ephraim Sewall's character. Lastly, Lydia Rees is a refreshing presence in a setting in which women were often sidelined; she uncovers key evidence the men overlook, crucial to solving the case. This well-researched mystery series entry will please fans and newcomers alike.
From Kirkus.

Chapter 1

Rees was driving home through town when he saw Rouge standing with two men outside the tavern. The audible shouting, accompanied with angry gestures, stirred Rees's curiosity – Sundays were usually the quietest of days – and he pulled into the yard.

The two men facing Rouge, a shorter balding fellow, and a large, much younger man with brown hair were amusingly dissimilar. Easily Rouge's height, the young man's hands were the size of small hams. But it was the smaller of the two who was doing all the talking. Rees thought they looked familiar but knew he didn't know them.

"I want my daughter," the smaller man shouted as he shook his finger in Rouge's face. "I want you to find her in that strange religious group and return her to me."

Rouge sighed and glanced longingly at the tavern's door. As the town constable, he was frequently pulled away from his business, and usually not at a convenient time.

"What's going on?" Rees asked as he climbed out of the wagon.

"I should have known you'd turn up, as soon there was some excitement," Rouge said. But he looked relieved.

"What's going on here?" Rees repeated.

"My daughter was abducted by that group, the ones they call the Shakers," the belligerent man said. "And he," gesturing to Rouge, "won't help me get her back."

"Abducted?" Rees said in surprise. That did not sound like the Shakers to him. An insular group, they usually kept to themselves. "Did they capture her and drag her off?"

"As good as. She met one of those young men selling seeds, whips and such, and he turned her head talking about the community. The next thing I know, she says she wants to join them. Then, when I say no, she runs off. Fifteen, and off on her own."

'She first joined the Shakers in March," Rouge told Rees. He nodded. Now he remembered these men.

"Mr. Weitz, is it?" he asked. The enraged fellow spared a glance at Rees before turning back to Rouge. "And Brother Jonathan," the constable continued, "allowed you to take her home. When was that? April? No, May."

"So, she was not abducted," Rees said.

"She's only fifteen," Weitz said angrily. "Who knows what will happen to her –." He stopped abruptly, on something that sounded almost like a sob.

Rees recalled the terror that had gripped him when his oldest son David had run away several years ago. Anything could happen on the road and Rees, at that time, knew nothing about the Shakers, the formally named The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming. Frightened, consumed with guilt, Rees had done exactly

what this man had done; pursued his son.

"I understand," he said, turning a sympathetic glance at the other man. "Let's hope she reaches Zion. She'll be safe there."

"Safe? That man – the Brother – told her all kinds of lies. He deceived her. And as soon as she could, she ran away to join him. When I got her home in May, I locked her in her room."

"She ran away twice?" Rees said, his eyebrows rising.

"Yes. I'm not sure how she got away this time."

Rees could guess. A locked door was barely a deterrent to a determined woman. "How long ago did your daughter leave?" he asked.

"Three days. As soon as I saw she was gone, Jacob and I drove here as fast as we could. But, this time, when I asked Brother Jonathan about her, he said they hadn't seen her."

"Then she isn't there," Rees said.

"That Elder is lying," Mr. Weitz said, so angry spit flew out of his mouth.

"If the Elder says they don't have her, they don't," Rees said. He could see Rouge was hanging on to his temper with an effort. He was clenching and unclenching his hands. "The Shakers do not lie."

"So, you see, Mr. Weitz, I can do nothing." Rouge did not sound regretful.

"Are you certain Zion is where she would go?'" Rees asked. "Maybe another community? A relative?"

"Of course she'd come here. Weren't you listening? This is where she ran to before. And she followed that Brother." Mr. Weitz said 'Brother' as though it was a dirty word.

"She seems pretty determined," Rees said. David had been as well. But Rees had not tried to force his son home. Instead, he'd tried to understand why David had run away.

Rees glanced at Mr. Weitz's companion. He was a young man, twenties probably, and rather too old to be Mr. Weitz's son. Was he a brother then? Cousin?

"Becca is young and foolish," Mr. Weitz said. "She can't make this weighty decision by herself. When I find her, she'll come home with me and marry Jacob Hughson here and live a normal life."

Mr. Hughson's cheeks turned pink.

Rees could feel his eyes widening. Fifteen was young to wed; he could not imagine his daughter Jerusha marrying anyone, and she was almost seventeen. He wondered what she would say about Mr. Weitz's plans for his daughter, plans Becca evidently had no say in whatsoever.

Rouge sighed. "I'll ask again," he said.

"Ask? Ask? You need to take some armed men to that village and force them to surrender my daughter."

"We don't even know if she's there." Rouge frowned at Mr. Weitz. "That is not the way we conduct ourselves here, especially when we have no proof of any crime. I will ask again; that is all I can do."

Mr. Weitz stared at Rouge for several long seconds and Rees wondered if the little banty rooster of a man planned to throw a punch. But instead, muttering under his breath, Mr. Weitz turned around. "Come Jacob," he said and marched from the tavern.

"You handled that very well,' Rees said, clapping his friend on the back.

'I wish you didn't sound so surprised," Rouge said with a grin. Then his smiled faded. "I just hope Mr. Weitz doesn't do anything foolish." He glanced at Rees. 'Why are you here, anyway?'

"I heard shouting when I drove by," Rees replied. "I thought you were in trouble."

"Pshaw," Rouge scoffed.

"If I have time, I'll stop at Zion and speak with Jonathan. He doesn't lie. If the girl is there, he'll tell me."

Rouge nodded but said, "You have to feel sorry for the little hen. It is clear she doesn't want the life her father has planned out for her."

Rees's thoughts went once again to Jerusha. If he'd refused permission for her continued studies, would she have run away? Just imagining that sent his heart racing and he experienced a spasm of sympathy for Mr. Weitz. "I understand why Mr. Weitz is so upset. He's frightened. My Jerusha is going to a school in Connecticut; she wants to teach in an academy. She'll be so far away . . ."

"You don't want her to go?"

"Not really."

"Then keep her home. She's only a girl and will get married anyway."

"And risk driving her away forever?" Why, that would be so much worse. Rees did not want to be in Weitz's shoes. But he did not want to display his vulnerability to Rouge. Instead. he said, "I wonder what Margaret Kitt would say." Mrs. Kitt, a widow, ran a boarding house and so far had resisted Rouge's offers of marriage.

Rouge, looking alarmed, shook his head and changed the subject. "The kids of today; I don't know what's wrong with them."

When Rees left the tavern, both Mr. Weitz and the purported bridegroom had vanished.

Chapter 2

Lydia clicked her tongue disapprovingly when Rees told her about Mr. Weitz. “I’d run away too,” she said. Since that was exactly what she’d done, Rees knew she understood. Lydia’s father, however, had not bothered to search for her, enabling her to enjoy her years with the Shakers.

Rees spent the afternoon in the buckwheat field and felt quite virtuous at day’s end. Of course, he would do exactly the same the day following; each day like the one before it; so monotonous. And indeed, the following day began as usual; with milk the cows and feeding and watering the livestock. Some days he thought he would go to meet his Maker with his head on Daisy’s flanks. Finally finished at half past seven, he decided to take a respite from farm work. As he drank his first cup of coffee, he settled down to read the paper - although the news was worrisome. The Barbary Pirates were continuing their attacks against American ships. Dispatches sent via Portugal said the Bey insisted on a tribute of $20,000, a significant increase over prior years. The United States government could not afford such an amount. Although former President Adams had paid the tribute, President Jefferson refused and instead sent a fleet of ships to the Mediterranean. It appeared the United States was headed for a war.

A sudden knocking on the door interrupted Rees’s unhappy thoughts. He glanced at Lydia. She and Jerusha had begun boiling the first of many pots of water for the laundry. “I’m not expecting anyone,” Lydia said. “Certainly not now, not so early.”

“Me either,” Rees said in exasperation. Dropping the paper on the table, he went to the door and opened it. “Tobias!” he exclaimed in astonishment, his annoyance evaporating. They had not spoken in almost a year, not since Rees had questioned him regarding a previous murder in town. “Welcome. Come in.”

“I can’t stay,” Tobias said, his voice shaking. “I need your help.”

Rees examined the man in front of him. Tobias’s eyes were huge, and his dark skin glistened with sweat.

“Is something wrong with Ruth or the baby?” Lydia asked anxiously, wiping her hands on her apron as she stepped forward.

Tobias shook his head, his eyes fixed on Rees.

“You better come in,” Rees said, stepping away from the open door and gesturing the other man inside.

“I apologize for intruding,’ Tobias said. ‘And so early.’ He tried to smile.

‘It’s no trouble,” Rees said. “What’s wrong?”

Tobias took a deep breath. “It’s the Meeker family. I went to speak to Mr. Meeker. I sold him a new table and he hasn’t paid me for it yet, although last night he promised me he would, and I thought if I went early, I could deliver the table and catch him before he went to town, and then –.”

“Slow down,” Rees said. ‘Take a breath.’ He watched Tobias inhale. ‘All right. You went to the Meeker farm. Then what?” Rees knew the Meeker family had moved into Durham from Augusta about six months ago but had not yet met anyone except the oldest son, George. He was apprenticed to the town printer.

“I’ve met Mrs. Meeker a few times,” Lydia said. “She is a very pleasant woman.”

“They’re dead,” Tobias gasped. “They’re all dead.” A sob rose into his throat and he clapped a hand over his mouth.

“Who’s dead?” Rees asked. “The Meekers?”

“There’s blood everywhere.” Tobias gasped and closed his eyes as though pushing away the sight.

Seeing he would not get a clear account from Tobias, Rees looked at Lydia. She'd turned pale and one hand clutched her throat.

"I'd better go and look," he said. "I suspect this is not so terrible as he thinks." He gestured to the trembling man beside him. Lydia nodded.

"Yes. Go. We'll be fine. Annie should be back home soon."

Annie had left the night before to join her husband in inspecting their new house. It was still not completed, and the new bride was growing frustrated with the delays. Rees, however, was not unhappy. These pauses meant Annie would continue to live at the farm. Both Annie and Jerusha would be leaving soon, Jerusha within the next week, to begin the next chapter of their lives. Annie would join Thomas as a married woman and Jerusha would continue her studies at the Litchfield Female Academy in Connecticut. What would Lydia do once these young women left? Both were hard workers and relieved Lydia of much of the housework.

"What will I do?" Rees thought with a sigh. He would miss them both very much.

"I've passed Annie's house several times," Tobias said, momentarily diverted from his own worries. "How big will it be?"

"Six rooms and a large attic," Rees said. "I expect she'll need to add on. Eventually, when the children come."

"There's land enough," Tobias said, nodding.

"We'd better go," Rees said, putting his hat on his head. "I want to see what we're facing before Constable Rouge hears about this and arrives."

"It's too late," Tobias said glumly as they went through the door. "He's already there."

Rees turned to look at his friend. "I was hoping to send you home so Rouge didn't know you were there."

Tobias shook his head. "I saw the constable driving toward the Meeker place with another man. And I know they saw me as well."

Rees sighed. Rouge, a man prone to jumping to conclusions, would deem Tobias's discovery of the bodies suspicious and assume his guilt. Rees reasoned that if Tobias had had anything to do with the murders, he would have slipped away unseen with no one the wiser. "All right. I'll follow you to your shop. We can drive to the Meeker farm together."

"I don't want to go back to that place," Tobias said. He took his foot from the wagon step and turned around. "You don't know what it was like. Horrible. I'll never forget it."

"That may be true. But, if Rouge saw you and knows you were there, it will look suspicious if you don't accompany me. As though you were hiding something."

Tobias bit his lip. Rees waited. He knew Tobias had reason to worry. A few years previously, he'd been kidnapped off the streets of town and sold into slavery. Once he'd escaped, and rescued his wife, he'd been a suspect in the murder of the slave owner who'd pursued them all the way to Maine.

"All right," Tobias said at last. He climbed into the seat of his wagon.

"Wait,' Rees said, hurrying to the paddock. He was not prepared; he still had to harness Hannibal to his wagon.

"Why don't we take my wagon?" Tobias suggested.

Rees preferred to take his own and he shook his head. "If I take my own vehicle, you can leave early."

Tobias nodded gratefully.

They were soon on their way. It was only a few miles before they passed the spot where Annie's and Thomas's farm would lie. Rees did not stop. He could hear raised voices, both male and female, over the thick undergrowth screening the property from the road and guessed they were arguing with

the builder. Since August was now well advanced, the leaves on the trees were a tired green, and dusty. He hoped the house was finished before the cold weather. It would be close. Some of the maples already bore patches of orange.

It was only a few more miles before they reached the Meeker farm. It had once belonged to the White family but after the smallpox epidemic the previous fall, and the deaths of most of the children, the bereaved parents had moved away.

They pulled up in front of the house, next to Dr Burke's gig. Rouge's bay and another, unfamiliar horse, had been tied to a nearby tree. Rees jumped down and looked around.

During the Whites' tenancy, this farm had appeared indifferently cared for: the buildings dilapidated, and garbage strewn across the front yard. Now the trash was gone and the new wood repairing the house shone white with fresh paint. A cluster of yellow flowers bloomed near the fence.

"I'm not going in," Tobias said from the seat of his wagon. "I won't go in."

Rees nodded. "Very well. Wait here. I'll return directly." He strode across the dusty yard and went over the splintered porch. The front door stood open. He could already smell blood, thick and metallic, and hear the loud buzzing of flies.

Rees suddenly wished he had not wished for a break in the monotony.