



## Desert Wives: Polygamy Can Be Murder

**Betty Webb**

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The sun-baked Southwestern desert is also a land of shadows and secrets. Among the secrets are compounds of polygamists hidden in rugged canyons. When Scottsdale P.I. Lena Jones agrees to rescue a thirteen-year-old from a forced polygamous marriage, she does not expect to stumble upon the body of the sixty-eight-year-old prospective bridegroom as she and the girl flee the canyon. Worse, soon after she reunites the teenager with Esther-her client and the girl's mother-deputies arrive from Utah to take the girl back. Unlike polygamy and child rape, murder-especially of a man-is serious, and Esther is the top suspect.

She begs Lena to help clear her. With fellow detective Jimmy Sisiwan watching their office, Lena heads back to Utah to find the real killer. Her chance to get into the closed Purity compound comes when a disillusioned member offers to take her there, ostensibly as his second wife.

This facade gives Lena the chance to question the inhabitants and discover their strange mores. Beneath its pious surface, the group seethes with rivalries and resentments. Prophet Solomon had many sons who might benefit from his death. He also had some bitter co-wives, a council of Elders who opposed him, and a genetics-based secret to hide. In a topsy-turvy society where even adult women have to defer to the whim of a teenage boy, almost anyone could be the murderer.

The outspoken Lena finds the polygamists' rules hard to obey while she investigates the murder. She is incapable of being "quiet and obedient" as "Godly" women should be. To keep her peace of mind she sneaks off at sunrise and sunset to watch the play of colors upon the "fat white cumulus clouds" and the sheer red canyon walls. The story's sense of place is strong. Both Lena and the reader learn that it's possible to feel claustrophobic and utterly isolated at the same time.

The book provides a strong indictment of the area's outlaw polygamy. Women are brainwashed into submission and kept secluded from the larger society, child rape is endemic, and sympathizers in outside officialdom turn away most interference. The author, a features writer for the Phoenix Area Tribune newspapers, knows the region well. Readers who liked the author's prior novel, *Desert Noir*, may wish that Lena's Pima Indian partner Jimmy and her cowboy boyfriend Dusty played bigger roles here, but they'll undoubtedly be back.

*Desert Wives* explores a little known corner of American life. Anyone who appreciates a not-too-gory mystery should enjoy it.

EMILY ALWARD (March / April 2003)

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