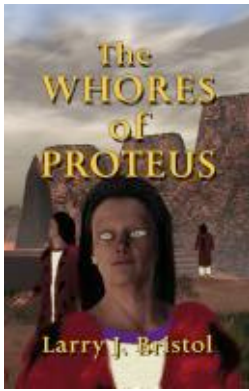


The
WHORES
of
PROTEUS

Larry J. Bristol



Proteus IV has suffered nine ritualistic murders spanning a century. None of them has been solved. While there are few clues, legends abound. One is that native Proteans are shape-shifters. Another is the women at The Lucky Lady Ranch are native Proteans. Though there is no evidence, another legend claims these ladies are the murderers. Can Sheriff Deryk Douglas solve the mystery known throughout the galaxy as The Whores of Proteus?

The Whores of Proteus

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Day 1: Tuesday

Chapter 1

A maze of official vehicles surrounded the scene, filling the darkness of a moonless night with a mixture of red and blue lights, flashing alternatively, but in an unsynchronized manner. The resulting light show was certain to grab the attention of anyone nearby, possibly causing an attack of nausea, and perhaps even inducing a seizure for an individual suffering from that particular affliction. When the deputy at the perimeter of this maelstrom waved him through, Sheriff Deryk Douglas skillfully maneuvered his patrol craft over and through the maze, hovered for a moment, then allowed it to settle to the ground just outside the small cabin that was the center, but not the cause, of all this commotion.

Deryk had barely opened the vehicle door when Deputy Terry Sawchuk greeted him. “Sorry to drag you out at this time of night, Sheriff, but I knew you would really want to see this.”

“Who’s leading the investigation, Terry?” Deryk asked.

The deputy looked around quickly, then shrugged before grinning his answer. “It appears I am.”

“And who’s the victim?” Deryk asked, stifling a yawn.

“All indications are that it’s Dallas Caldwell,” the deputy replied, “but as far as I know, that’s still unconfirmed.”

“Unconfirmed?” Deryk asked incredulously.

“The coroner is not being very forthcoming,” the deputy nodded, “and he will not allow anyone inside except for the forensics team.”

“Do you suppose he might let *me* in?” Deryk scowled. When the Deputy Sawchuk merely smiled sheepishly, he scratched the back of his head and sighed. “Who discovered the body?”

“I did,” the deputy answered. “I was investigating a vehicular accident out here on Caldwell Canyon Road. It occurred right in front of his cabin, so I came to see if Mr. Caldwell had seen or heard anything. The lights were on inside, but nobody responded to my knock. The door was unlocked and partially open, so I stuck my head inside. That’s when I saw the body. I rushed in to see if there was anything I could do for him, but the victim was already dead. I immediately called into HQ.”

“What about the accident investigation?” Deryk asked.

“Well, that sort of pales by comparison, don’t you think?” the deputy answered sheepishly.

Deryk shook his head. “I understand your thinking, Terry, but this is

sloppy work. What if this homicide and the accident are related somehow?" When the deputy lowered his eyes shamefully, Deryk shrugged, then asked, "Let's move on. Tell me what you had uncovered about the accident before you found the murder victim."

"The driver appears to have lost control of the vehicle, swerved off the road, and slammed into the canyon wall over there," the deputy answered, pointing his finger in the general direction. "According to the paramedics, he has no serious injuries. He was probably lucky. He was completely incoherent, and reeked of alcohol. When they were done with him, he was taken into custody and transported to jail. Maybe we can get something sensible out of him in the morning when he sobers up."

"Who was it?" Deryk asked.

"Coyote Bill," the deputy replied.

"That figures," Deryk nodded. "Did he say anything worth noting?"

The deputy sighed. "Not much. He claimed he swerved to avoid hitting a couple of animals of some kind in the middle of the road."

"I can see why you concluded there is no connection between the accident and the murder," Deryk stated.

"It appears to be nothing but a coincidence," the deputy nodded. "It's probably a fortuitous one. Some kids were parked just up the road and heard the noise of the crash. They called it in, and I was dispatched to investigate. The way Mr. Caldwell lives... I mean, *lived* all alone way out here in the middle of nowhere, who knows how long it might have been before anyone came along and discovered his body?"

Deryk thought about that response for a moment, nodded his head, then asked, "What do you know about those kids?"

Deputy Sawchuk checked his notes. "David Elam and Nancy Jordan," he announced. "I know David personally. He's a good kid, a member of my scout troop. He made Eagle Scout just last summer. He got here before the paramedics, and was rendering first aid."

"Impressive!" Deryk nodded. "What about the girl? That last name sounds familiar."

"I'd never met her before tonight," Deputy Sawchuk stated, "but she's a really nice looking girl! Her father is Frank Jordan. I seem to remember he's some sort of big shot at the First Bank of Proteus."

"Yeah, that's where I've heard the name before," Deryk nodded.

"They were parked just up the road a bit. They heard the noise of the accident, but did not see anything. They called it in, then drove up here.

The girl seemed a little agitated about something, and since I saw no reason to keep them around at the time, I sent them both home.”

“That’s fine,” Deryk nodded. “We’ll interview them tomorrow. Okay, so let’s get on with this other business. You know how I hate mysteries!”

“Yeah, me too!” the deputy grinned. He escorted his boss to the front door of the cabin, allowing Deryk to greet each of the other officers gathered nearby standing around looking official, but otherwise seemingly idle. As Deryk reached for the doorknob, the deputy whispered, “You might want to brace yourself, Sheriff.”

After giving the deputy a puzzled look, Deryk opened the door and stepped inside. In spite of his experience and training, Deryk could not remain passive at the scene before him. “Jesus!” he said under his breath. The floor, walls, and even the ceiling of the small room were so splattered with blood that one might think they had actually been painted red. In the middle of the floor, a man was kneeling before the mangled body of the victim, examining that body with an instrument of some kind. “What have you got, Doc?” Deryk asked simply.

Dr. Shuntaro Hida, the Medical Examiner, looked up and shook his head in disgust. “Not much,” he replied, “but I have not yet completed my examination. From the liver temperature, I can fix the time of death at a few minutes after midnight. The cause of death is rather obvious. His heart was lacerated by an extremely sharp object. It would be impossible for these wounds to have been self-inflicted, so there is no question this is a homicide. I’ll have to run some tests to prove this, of course, but I suspect we have the murder weapon right here.” He held up an unusual object, stating casually, “I removed this object from his chest during my examination.”

“What are you thinking? You’ve been handling the murder weapon?” Deryk asked in alarm.

“Relax,” the doctor explained. “It’s already been processed by my CSI team. It’s as clean as a whistle. No prints, no markings of any kind. And there’s no DNA on it other than that of the victim. It may as well not exist as far as any forensic value it can offer. Check it out for yourself.”

Deryk’s mouth hung open as he examined the strange object. It seemed to be made entirely of a single black substance, probably a ceramic of some kind. The word “black” seemed completely inadequate to describe this thing. It was so black it made his eyes water, as if the thing was somehow absorbing the light that fell on it. It was heavy and

unwieldy. The business end consisted of three blades set at one hundred twenty degree angles around an imaginary central axis where their points nearly came together but did not quite touch. The inner and outer edges of each blade were razor sharp. At the base of each blade was a tubular appendage. The three tubes joined together in a triangular arrangement to form an awkward handle. “What the hell?”

“I’m trying not to jump to conclusions, Sheriff,” the doctor replied, “but it’s hard to ignore the obvious. I have seen several of these things before! That’s why I’m keeping everyone out of here who does not have a specific need to see all this.”

“Well, that seems like sound thinking, anyway,” Deryk nodded. “What can you tell me?”

“As you might recall, a few years after you came to Proteus IV, back when you were still a deputy,” the doctor shrugged, “there was a similar homicide. The victim was also a prospector living out here on the outskirts of civilization, exactly like this. Just like in this case, the scene was awash with the victim’s blood, his body horribly mutilated. I removed the murder weapon from his chest myself. Using only my memory as a basis for comparison, I would have to say this weapon is absolutely identical to the one before. In fact, it is absolutely identical to the seven other weapons we have in the evidence lockers, the weapons used in seven other unsolved murders that go back nearly a hundred years.”

“Oh, come off it, Doc,” Deryk chided. “Are you next going to tell me that those stories from the old legend are true? Have *The Whores of Proteus* returned to afflict the planet with their evil once again?”

“All I know is that none of those murders has ever been solved,” the doctor blurted, “and it seems we have another very similar instance. Well, Sheriff, I’m afraid I have some very bad news for you. It’s déjà vu all over again. Tag, as they say. You’re it!”

“Okay, I’ll admit there seem to be a lot of similarities in these murders, at least on the surface, but they have been going on for decades! It would be impossible for them all to have been committed by one man!” he demanded.

“Or even by one woman?” the doctor smirked.

“Get serious for a moment, will you, Doc?” he frowned. “What we obviously have here is a series of copycat murders. As far as those legends go, I do not believe in the supernatural, and neither do you. And even if you do, I expect you to put a sock in it. I need you to provide me with reliable and objective evidence, and not pure conjecture based on

simple circumstantial similarities. That's the proper way to go about solving these tough cases."

"Okay, okay," the doctor agreed. "I get your point. On the other hand, you and I both know that truth is often stranger than fiction. A lot of people have investigated these crimes over the years and no one has ever solved them. Whether there is any truth to it or not, it won't be long before talk of that legend is going to start up again. Last time, there was mass hysteria all over the planet, and we nearly had a riot in the streets of Red Hill. And that, my friend, is the reality of this situation. Fantasy or not, people are going to be frightened by this."

"I know, I know," Deryk nodded with a forlorn sigh. "Our work is clearly laid out for us. Is there anything else you can tell me right now?"

"Yeah," the doctor answered, "unless I'm mistaken, there is another bit of evidence you might find interesting about this weapon. This was never disclosed to anyone other than the investigation team. Move it towards those objects sitting on the surface of that table."

Deryk moved the murder weapon over the table where a small collection of loose metallic objects was resting. As the blades approached them, these objects sprang from the surface of the table to cling to the weapon. "Magnetic?" he asked.

"Very," the doctor replied. "It seems to be made of magnetite, and not just any magnetite. The material has clearly been highly refined, and the magnetic field is unusually strong."

"Why would anyone make a weapon out of magnetite?"

"I have no guess. On second thought, let me rephrase that," the doctor smiled. "I cannot make a guess based on anything you would consider to be reliable and objective. It's merely *circumstantial* that this weapon and the other eight we have collected over the last century are all made of highly refined magnetite with unusually strong magnetic properties. And it's clearly just a *coincidence* that someone might decide it is a native Protean artifact."

"Up yours!" Deryk grinned, as he began moving towards the door. "I'll expect your complete report to be on my computer no later than 06:50 this morning."

"Such a generous amount of time!" the doctor smirked. "Just over four whole hours! Well, since there is not really going to be very much for me to write up, it won't take me too long. You'll have it."

Chapter 3

Deryk closed the file containing the Medical Examiner's report for what must have been the fourth time. There was simply nothing there. Someone, or something, had entered the victim's cabin around midnight. There was no sign of a break-in or forced entry. The obvious conclusion one could draw was that the victim was familiar with his assailant. Moments later, this visitor had plunged a curious weapon into the victim's heart. There were no other wounds. The only conclusion one could draw from that is that the victim had not put up a struggle. From that, one would have to conclude either that the attack had come as a complete surprise, or that the victim had been incapacitated in some way before the lethal blow.

Following the attack, the perpetrator simply left the scene of the crime, apparently neither taking anything nor leaving anything. *Other than the murder weapon*, Deryk corrected himself. *Why would he leave that?* Even though it appeared to be a dead end, Deryk knew the murder would most likely be solved or not, purely on what he could make of that single clue, a bizarre knife made of a ceramic form of magnetite with unusually strong magnetic properties.

While he concentrated on the meaning of this one clue, a deputy stuck his head into Deryk's office. "We're ready whenever you are, Sheriff," he announced.

"Huh?" Deryk replied absently. He then remembered he had called everyone involved in the investigation to gather for an early morning strategy meeting at 08:50. "Oh, okay. Thanks! I'll be right there."

The chatter in the meeting room fell silent as soon as Deryk entered. He moved to the front of the room and turned to face the gathered audience. "I assume each of you has studied the Medical Examiner's report. Any comments?"

Most of the officers and detectives merely exchanged a glance. Only one voiced his opinion aloud. "Useless," he stated.

"Pretty much," Deryk agreed. "I'm not complaining about your work, Doctor Hida, but there is simply nothing there we can go on. All we really have is this," he said, holding up the murder weapon.

A general murmur filled the room. The only identifiable comment Deryk heard was, "Holy crap!"

"This piece of crap, holy or otherwise, is the only solid piece of evidence we have!" Deryk said emphatically. "I want each of you to examine it, memorize it, and think about it. And after you have done

that, I want you to think about it some more. The first question I want answered is, what the hell *is* this thing? After that, we'll need to know who made it, and why?"

Once again, silence permeated the atmosphere. Finally, one junior officer in the back row raised his hand. "Sir?" he began timidly when Deryk acknowledged him, "it has to be the work of a native Protean, don't you think?"

Deryk sighed. "You may well be right, and this is something we will need to investigate thoroughly. That investigation will undoubtedly lead us to ask many other questions. In the meantime, there are a few standard avenues of investigation we will need to follow. They may seem mundane and unlikely to reveal anything useful in an investigation such as this, but the only way to solve this kind of bizarre crime is police work... good, solid police work. Everyone involved in this investigation must be objective, and conduct themselves in a completely professional manner.

"We will start immediately. One bit of good news is that we have the crime scene completely locked down. I want it to remain that way until further notice. Only individuals personally authorized by me are to be admitted. That specifically includes the press and those so-called special investigators from the Governor's office. Is that clear to everyone? If any unauthorized individual attempts to gain access, and I don't care if it is Governor Newcombe himself, no matter how innocent it may appear to be, your orders are to retain that person for questioning, and notify me immediately!"

A senior officer chuckled as he asked, "Playing the old adage about the criminal always returning to the scene of the crime, Sheriff?"

"Something like that," Deryk replied, returning his grin, "unless someone has a better suggestion. Means, motive, and opportunity. I need each of you to be alert for anything that might play into those factors.

"Number one: Who had the means to commit this crime? The evidence seems to indicate the victim was familiar with the perpetrator. So who did the victim know? Are we looking for an individual or more than one? Are they male, female, or a mixture? We are going to investigate every individual who has had any contact with the victim, and especially recent contact.

"Number two: Who benefits from this crime? Did the victim have any enemies? Does someone gain financially? Was it a crime of passion? Jealousy? Or was it simply a random act by some madman?"

Perhaps the investigation into the people who recently had contact with the victim will reveal a possible motive, but at this very moment, we have no motive at all. If we cannot come up with a reason why someone would actually want to kill Dallas Caldwell, we will probably never get anywhere!

“Number three: Who had access to the victim last night? Unfortunately, because of the remote location, it seems nearly everyone on this entire planet may have had access last night. On the other hand, most of them will probably have alibis, some means to prove they were elsewhere at the time of the murder. But do not accept anything until it has been confirmed. We will investigate those alibis closely. Sometimes, even an airtight alibi can spring a leak if you examine it closely enough.

“We will be pursuing all of these avenues day and night, looking for useful and objective evidence. As you all know, what seems to be the most insignificant and trivial detail often holds the key that unlocks the mystery. We need to find that key!”

Once again, he scanned the faces in the room, assuring himself he had their undivided attention. “Ladies and gentlemen, I want to emphasize something else I think is crucial. As most of you are aware, there are certain aspects of this murder that resemble other murders, yet unsolved. There will almost certainly be a great deal of speculation about these similarities in the public sector. People are going to be frightened by this, and as we all know, frightened people have this unfortunate tendency to act irrationally. We must make absolutely certain that *we* are not the ones who feed that beast.

“You’re going to be asked questions. Before you answer, think carefully about whatever answer you give, and be very careful about how you express that answer. If necessary, simply state that you are not at liberty to discuss the details of an ongoing investigation. Above all, you must avoid any kind of speculative comment, or anything that could easily be misinterpreted by the public.

“This goes double for everything having to do with that legend. We must not give the general public the idea that we are in pursuit of the legendary *Whores of Proteus*. The last thing we need is to create a general panic where everyone is afraid their next door neighbor is some sort of monster in disguise. If asked a direct question about that legend, simply smile confidently and state that we are investigating *all* possibilities, no matter how unlikely they might seem.

“Try to keep all your answers precise and simple. Consider the following statements, and think about using them as your guide.

Officially, we are investigating the homicide of Dallas Caldwell. There is a great deal of investigation to be done before any conclusions can be reached. We have noted there are some similarities between this incident and certain crimes from the past. However, at this time we have no evidence to indicate there is any connection between them. We will, of course, pursue all possible avenues of investigation. When all other possibilities have been eliminated, the one that remains, no matter how unlikely, must surely be the truth.”

The room was filled with nodding heads and a general murmur of agreement. “Okay,” Deryk continued, “I understand we canvassed the area for clues, and any witness who might have seen or heard anything. What do we have there?”

“As you know,” an officer nodded, “it seems Mr. Bill Horning had an accident while driving in the area around midnight. When he arrived here at the jail, he was extremely intoxicated and totally incoherent, although we did manage to get a little out of him. At first, he claimed he had lost control when he swerved to avoid hitting an animal of some kind. Later, the story changed, and he claimed he swerved to avoid hitting a man who was walking in the middle of the road! Then, it changed so there were *two* men. That soon changed back into two *animals*. Later, he began claiming there were actually two *women* in the middle of the road. Not only that, but he even mentioned one of them by name. Are you ready for this?”

“Oh, shit!” the Sheriff growled. “I know I’m not going to like this. Who does he claim he saw?”

“He claimed it was Miss Lilly Senjack herself, accompanied by one of her working girls!” the deputy replied.

Deryk closed his eyes and shook his head. “That’s *all* we need,” he added.

“Well, I’m not sure we can rely on his testimony,” the officer chuckled. “As you know, he was extremely intoxicated when he got here. It seems he was returning home from one of the local bars. We’ve already interviewed the bartender. He told us Coyote Bill was extremely drunk last night, and had been refused further service. When our star witness began to get obnoxious, the bouncer threw him out of the place. That was about 24:90, just ten minutes before midnight.”

Deryk shook his head once again. “We have to follow up on every lead, no matter how unreliable the witness. We want to know, for example, if he happened to stop and talk to Caldwell. Might he have been the last person to see Caldwell alive? You all know what *that* could

mean!

“Let’s hold him as long as we can. The last thing we need is for that sort of story to go public. When and if we let him go, I’ll instruct him to keep his damn mouth shut!

“And if I hear one more word about that damn legend, some heads are going to roll! Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir!” the officers in the room snickered.

Deputy Terry Sawchuk rose to explain his part of the investigation. “As I explained last night, it seems there were a couple of teenage kids parked just down the road from Caldwell’s place around midnight, getting better acquainted, I suspect. They were the ones who called in to report Coyote’s accident. The boy said he saw an animal or a human leaving the area on foot. The girl was sure there were two of them, human figures of a small stature. Because it was so dark, they could not make out much. They were inconsistent on whether there was one or two, whether they were animal or human, male or female, everything. They both doubted they could ID anyone from mug shots.”

“Oh, that’s just great,” Deryk frowned. “Is there anything else from the crime scene?”

“Not much,” another deputy replied. “The whole area was covered in a blanket of snow before we could make a thorough examination of the grounds for footprints and the like. If the sky clears as expected, and melts away the snow, we might still be able to find an undisturbed trail.”

“I understand the skies will be clear by late afternoon,” Deryk nodded. “Get out there as soon as possible. I would rather not have the scene exposed to any more disturbance before we can give it a good look. Is there anything else?”

One of the forensic investigators stood up, consulting his notebook for what he surely already knew was there. “We found one additional oddity,” he announced, “but we do not know what to make of it.”

“Go ahead,” Deryk urged.

“Well, at first we thought the perpetrator had tried to clean up the scene, but stopped when he saw how futile that effort would be,” the officer stated. “We’re no longer sure of that. We don’t know why, but what we can say for sure is that someone smeared some of the victim’s blood.”

“Accidentally?” Deryk asked.

“We’re not sure,” the officer shrugged, “but we don’t think so. It was done directly beneath the body, as if the perpetrator lifted the body,

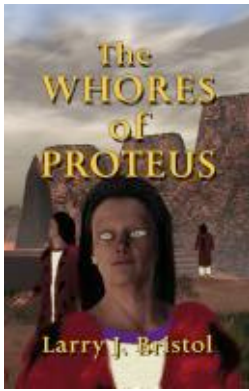
smear the blood, and then returned the body to its original position. It was done with a great deal of care, without disturbing anything else. Something tells me it was done purposefully, but we can offer no explanation as to what that purpose might be. And it also appears that quite a bit of blood is actually missing! Our theory is it must have been absorbed by whatever was used to smear the blood.”

Deryk contemplated this bit of news before asking his question. “Is there anything in the files of the unsolved murders to indicate this also occurred in those other crimes?”

“I don’t think so,” the officer replied, “but I plan to go through the files one more time to make sure.”

“Do it!” Deryk ordered. “Let me know what you find. Does anyone have anything else?”

When no one had anything more to offer, Deryk gave his final marching orders. “Okay, folks, we have work to do. Means, motive, and opportunity. Let’s go find them.”



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The Whores of Proteus

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