



*Bones
in the
Back Forty*

A Bea Rivers
Mystery

Marty Eberhardt

Advance Praise for *Bones in the Back Forty*

“Marty Eberhardt has penned another winner.”
Kris Neri, Award-winning author of *Hopscotch Life*

“This gripping story intertwines Eberhardt’s deep knowledge of the desert landscape with characters whose social and ethical leanings invite readers to pause and consider the impacts each of us has on our fragile environment.”

Betsy Randolph, 2021-2022 President, Women Writing the West

“Marty Eberhardt crafts the perfect picture of life as a public garden professional. She skillfully creates characters both as charming as the garden itself and as complicated as the history of the Southwest... filled with twists and turns, making it a great read!”

Michelle Conklin, Screenwriter and Executive Director, Tucson Botanical Gardens

“Eberhardt has skillfully created a world of characters we all want to know, so that we root for Bea as she digs her way into this second harrowing “garden” adventure. We shiver as not only Bea, but her loved ones face threats from a diabolical mind.”

Mary Coley, author of *Blood on the Mother Road*, 2022 fiction winner, Oklahoma Book Awards

Bones in the Back Forty

A Bea Rivers Mystery

By

Marty Eberhardt



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Chapter One

If you work in a public botanical garden, and you're having a bad day, you can walk out the door and your equilibrium is restored. That's what Bea was telling herself, as she went past the traveled part of Shandley Gardens, with its manicured paths and themed, planted beds. She wasn't in a mood to linger in the tropical greenhouse, where things were blooming despite last night's January freeze. She stopped for a moment in the native plant garden, admiring the sun on the long silvery spikes of deer grass, cascading over some sharp-spined agaves, and then she strode out to the wild desert area. The garden's founder, Alan Shandley, had laid out some primitive paths back there, in an area populated by jackrabbits, deer mice, and giant saguaro cacti which stretched like a huge dance troupe all the way to the Rincon Mountains. Bea always found that walking caused her brain to engage.

She was trying to resolve a dispute between two absolutely dedicated volunteers who were also quite dedicated to their own points of view about how meetings should be run. She found herself in this umpire position upon occasion, as her title was education director/volunteer coordinator. Nothing that a refreshing walk couldn't make clear, she thought as she headed to a particular tree, a big green-barked palo verde that would mark her turn-around point. But she was surprised to see her colleague Javier working in this remote part of

Shandley Gardens. He'd clearly been fixing the old, sagging barbed-wire fence that marked their property line with the national park. When he turned towards her, she didn't even look at the shovel he was holding out, because her eyes were caught by his expression. The lines in his kind, sun-weathered face were screwed into a grimace. He looked down at the shovel. She followed his eyes. There were a couple of ribs lying there, and Bea wondered for a moment why Javier, of all people, would be so disconcerted by an old deer skeleton. Then she noticed the bone at the back of the shovel. "It's human, Bea," Javier said, as she stared at what must be a lower jaw.

"It can't be!" she said, automatically, and then she was silent as Javier carefully put the bone back on the ground and shoveled up a new one. It was the rest of the skull. He held it out to her again, and she stepped back.

Not again, was her first reaction. Business had finally returned to normal at Shandley Gardens after a different body had been found on the grounds last summer. *That was only six months ago*. Liz Shandley, Alan's wife, had been hit by a falling eucalyptus branch. When it turned out that the woman's death was no accident, the entire board and staff had been possible suspects. *It would be utterly horrible if we had to go through all that again. This is not happening*.

"I guess I'd better stop now and tell the cops," Javier said. His mind seemed to be working considerably more clearly than Bea's, which was in full-fledged denial.

"I doubt it has anything to do with the Gardens. It's probably somebody from ages ago. Maybe an ancient Hohokam, or an Apache, or a miner, or something. This place has had a long parade of inhabitants," Bea said, and then stopped herself. "Sorry."

She knew perfectly well that Javier's family had been

part of that “long parade.” They’d owned the ranch that was now Shandley Gardens but had been cheated out of their property in the early part of the twentieth century by a wily Anglo rancher. Alan Shandley had bought the place some years later when the unscrupulous rancher went bankrupt. Alan had created beautiful gardens, but when he died, his wife had been quite happy to move into town and turn the place into a nonprofit botanical garden.

“I just hope this has nothing to do with Alan,” said Javier. He placed the bones back carefully into the hole he’d been digging and leaned the shovel against one of the sagging fence posts. The barbed wire was loose enough so that any coyote, or human, could get through. That had probably been the case for many years.

“How long has that park service road been there?” Bea asked. Javier knew more about Shandley’s recent history than anybody. He’d worked as Alan’s gardener for years when the gardens had been Alan’s private hobby.

“I don’t know. I started working for Alan in eighty-one and the road was here then.” That meant Javier had been working on this property for twenty-eight years. No wonder he knew every inch of the place.

“We’d better walk back and call this in,” Bea said. She’d purposefully left her cell phone in her office, but Javier had his.

He pulled it out of his pocket and waved it at her. “I’ll let Ethan know.” As he started punching in their boss’s number, Bea thought he’d regained some of the bedrock composure that she so appreciated. The grimace was gone.

It was time for her to get back to the office; this stress-releasing walk had been neither as quick nor as calming as she’d intended. On the other hand, the issue that had caused her to walk out the door now seemed

awfully petty.

Back at her desk, she'd just managed to concentrate on the email she was sending to the feuding volunteers when she heard a familiar, heavy footfall approaching her office. Javier stood in the doorway. "The Tucson PD is sending somebody out here right away to tape the spot off. And to talk to me. And to look things over." He swallowed. "I feel like I'm in a plane that's gaining speed and about to take off. Guess I ought to find something constructive to do until they show up."

"Buckle up," Bea said. As he left, she told herself she ought to find something constructive to do, too. She sent off her email and was creating a PowerPoint entitled "Lose the Lawn! Water-Conserving Options." She'd managed to create a decent-looking title slide, plus a couple more, but she kept thinking about Javier out there with the cops. Maybe she should take another walk, not all the way to the palo verde tree, but close... She created a few more slides. She was putting on her jacket when she heard Javier's boots in the hall again. She'd been hoping for that sound. He walked straight through the door and dropped into the chair in front of her desk.

"The bad news is I have to head down to police headquarters for another interview with the cops. That last one was just 'preliminary. Not with the primary investigator." Javier had had a time of it during the crisis six months ago. "The good news is your friend Marcia is in charge again. I guess I'll see her downtown."

This *was* good news. Bea and Marcia had been friends since elementary school, and their trust in each other was rock-solid. They'd taken each other's measure back in junior high, when a teacher had been sexually aggressive on a school field trip, and the girls had given each other the courage to report the abuse, at the ripe old age

of twelve. Marcia and Bea had worked together on Liz's case at Shandley Gardens six months ago. If Marcia was in charge of this latest incident, Bea could unclench her hands, which she'd just noticed were tight in her lap. Also, she reflected, she could give those tight shoulders a roll.

"Well, let's hope Marcia wraps this up soon," Javier said, as he walked out.

Bea had to interrupt her less-than-cheerful thoughts to conduct the weekly newcomer class, which she'd entitled "Arizona is Not Michigan... What and How to Plant in the Sonoran Desert." The usual suspects were there—refugees from dark and endless winters, folks who'd bought homes in Tucson and then were completely flummoxed about how to deal with so little rainfall, mandatory conservation measures, hard-as-rock caliche soil, and totally unfamiliar plants. Bea wasn't on her game, though. When one of the newbies protested that too many desert plants were "skeletal," Bea found herself shivering.

"Are you ill?" asked a woman who'd said she wasn't from Michigan. Bea's class was still aptly titled, since the woman was from neighboring Wisconsin.

"Oh, no, I'm fine, thanks. I probably should put on my sweater. We keep the heat low to save energy, but it can get chilly, don't you think?" Bea wasn't sure if this should be considered diplomacy or outright falsehood, but it turned out to be a useful dodge, because another woman, quite thin and frail-looking, said she'd appreciate it if Bea turned up the heat.

When her class was nearly over, Bea saw Javier pull into the parking lot. The classroom, which was also the board room, was the former dining area of the Shandley home. Its windows looked out onto what had once been an attractive front yard. The yard was still appealing, but it was considerably smaller than it had been to make way

for a public parking lot. Javier was getting out of his white pickup, well within Bea's sightline. As she distributed helpful planting handouts and Shandley Gardens membership applications, she saw Javier striding towards the door that led to their boss's office. Ethan Preston, Shandley's Executive Director, had an office that was once the master bedroom, and it had a door that opened onto a side courtyard, where Javier was clearly headed. Bea would have loved to be in on their meeting, but somebody wanted more information on the benefits of membership, and the chairs and tables needed to be put back into committee formation, so there was no hope of hearing what Javier had to say.

Bea went past Ethan's doorway on the way to her office, but it was shut, of course. She couldn't make out anything Ethan and Javier were saying, although she lingered in the hall, pretending to read an important message on her cell phone. Her ruse was useless. She went back to her office and shut the door, determined to concentrate on her volunteer staffing chart.

Javier's steady heavy-booted walk stopped at her door and he knocked. Bea said "Come in!" before he'd gotten in a second knock.

"I don't suppose you're curious."

"Not a chance," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Of course not." Javier plopped down again in the chair that faced Bea's desk. "Ethan told me I'd better stop off here before I got back to my 'actual job.' So... Ethan called Marcia and asked her to have the cops drive to the site via the park service road. That way visitors aren't freaked out by a bunch of cop cars in the main parking lot. I guess they were okay with that... they're down there digging up the poor guy and doing whatever they do to look for clues. Hopefully no tourists will venture out that way this

afternoon. The cops will probably send the bones over to the medical examiner. He has a forensic anthropologist on staff. He's my cousin, Bea," Javier said with a little laugh. "Marcia said he will brief Ethan a bit about what he finds before the ME report is done. As a courtesy."

Bea had ceased to be surprised at the people Javier was related to. These relationships had often benefited Shandley Gardens in the past, but a forensic anthropologist was a first.

"So right now we don't know how old the skeleton is. I'm hoping it's really old, like you said. Putting all of us out of the picture."

"Well, I hope we didn't just dig up an archaeological site. That wouldn't be so good, either."

Javier threw his hands up in a "Who knows?" gesture, and left Bea to her computer. But after reading the same sentence over three times, she decided to pack up for the day. It would be good to spend a nice, normal evening with her kids.

As she walked by Ethan's office, he called her in. Her boss was an athletic-looking guy, not much older than Bea, which meant he was fortyish. His shirts were pressed and so, too, were his slacks. Every time Bea registered his immaculate appearance, she thought about how his schedule gave him the time to cultivate it. In her harried single-parent world, there were not enough minutes in the day to become impeccably neat. But now Ethan's hair was sticking up on the left side, where he'd clearly run his hands through it. "I just got a call from the *Tucson Post*. That same reporter from the last time we had a... controversy here. Somebody reported the police digging in the Gardens. I told her I had no information, and that whatever happened probably occurred long before any of us were here. They'd already talked to

Officer Samuelson—Marcia—and of course she told them they don't comment on ongoing investigations. So, in the absence of facts, count on speculation. I just thought you'd want a heads-up."

It would have been easier to go home without this to ponder.

Chapter Two

Bea supposed that Ethan's parting words meant she'd need to discuss the skeleton with her seven-year-old son Andy and his little sister Jessie. Bea definitely didn't want their classmates to beat her to it.

Over baked yams, steamed chard, and turkey burgers, she let her kids know that their classmates might be talking about some old bones that were found at the Gardens, but "the person died a long time ago, and our friend Marcia will do a good job of figuring out what happened."

She hadn't finished that last sentence before Andy yelled, "Oh, *no!* Kids are going to be really mean about this, Mom. Jason Hanson already teases me that my mom works in a 'murder zone.' I guess he gets to watch a TV show called that."

Bea accepted the implied rebuke about her strict TV policies, but she was steamed about this bullying. "You can tell Jason Hanson that he should bring his family out for a nice day at the Gardens. They'll have a great time."

Andy rolled his eyes, a gesture he'd just perfected. Bea let go of the smile she was forcing and gave her son a hug, burying her face in his red hair. Jessie had been coloring a jungle scene during the entire discussion. Not for the first time, Bea wished a little of her kindergartener's carefree temperament would rub off on her brother.

After she tucked the kids into bed, Bea decided to forget the damned bones. The discovery was none of her

concern. In the worst of scenarios, the press would be an annoyance for a few days before they went away. In the best, the publicity would bring even more visitors to Shandley. The Gardens had gone from being the “best kept secret in town,” a moniker that nobody wanted, to a well-known attraction. Instead of thinking about the bones, she could focus on something positive. She smiled to herself. That would be her boyfriend, Frank. He’d be flying in the next morning...

“Boyfriend” was such an adolescent word for a thirty-five-year-old man dating a thirty-eight-year-old woman. Even though he’d kept his shabby studio apartment in Tucson in the two months he’d been on the East Coast, he’d be spending quite a bit of time in her detached, ground-level “unit” at Palo Verde Acres. And to celebrate their reunion, Bea and Frank were going to spend MLK Day weekend at a B & B in the little mountain town of Copperton, New Mexico. Bea’s ex-husband was taking care of the kids for the entire weekend. This was the most time he’d ever offered to be with their children, probably because his mother was visiting, and Bea aimed to take full advantage of the weekend. Who knew when there would be another one?

Her mind went back to Frank. He was almost too good to be true. He was considerate, good to her kids, and sexy to boot. And he was also considerate of his ailing mother, who needed him in Washington, D.C. He hadn’t had a stable job in Tucson, just piece work writing freelance stories and doing grant writing, which was his bread-and-butter... and which he could do anywhere. They’d had only a few months together before he’d gone back to the East Coast. She suspected, from his phone calls, that he felt pulled in both directions. In her darker moments, she also remembered that there had been a woman named Sherry

in Virginia, not so very far back in his past. Clearly, she'd have a lot to discuss with him, but she was going to have a good time for however long he was here, or however long the good time lasted. Once you had been married and divorced you had to think this way.

The next morning Bea had managed to rouse both of her grumpy children at six a.m. and pack them into the car to pick up Frank at the airport after his red-eye flight back to Tucson. Bea's heart quickened when she caught sight of him as she waited at the "Arrivals" curb and she wasn't sure she could afford that kind of reaction.

The children leapt on Frank, their grumpiness gone. Maybe it wasn't only her heart she'd need to watch. They were even more enthusiastic about the promise of hot chocolate once they got home. Back at the apartment, sitting around the breakfast table, the whole situation began to feel shockingly comfortable, as the kids acquired chocolate mustaches and Bea and Frank sipped some very strong coffee.

She began to catch him up on the skeleton story. "So far, we don't know whose bones they are, but I'm hoping maybe we'll know more today. We're all hoping the skeleton's too old to implicate Alan or Liz Shandley, much less any of us at the Gardens now."

Bea was savoring her second cup of coffee, a French roast that Frank had brought from D.C., but then she looked at her watch. Time to get the kids to school.

As Andy put on his jacket, he asked, "Frank, are you going to stay in Tucson or go back to Virginia?" Her son was not one to mess around.

"Your mom and I are going to have some long talks about that this weekend." Andy pulled on his ear, a bad

sign. "I'd like to keep hanging out with you guys." Andy looked away, but Bea wasn't fooled. He was listening. "I'll see you when we get back from Copperton, buddy."

Bea's five-year-old daughter gave Frank a big hug goodbye, right after she threw herself at her mom. Then Frank reached for Andy, who gave him a tiny squeeze and wriggled away. He hugged his mother, but then gave his ear a long pull as he got in the car. "Mom, Dad said he wants to spend more time with us, too. But he doesn't."

"Well, you'll be with him for three whole days this weekend, him and Granny Bertha."

"Uh-huh." Andy silently looked out the window the rest of the way to the bus.

Bea was going to have to put her worry about Andy out of her mind for the weekend, too. That would be harder than forgetting the damned bones.

Bea and Frank planned to put in a few hours of work; Bea at Shandley, and Frank at his computer in Palo Verde Acres. Bea had figured on a return to routine, but that Friday was anything but normal. There was a note on her door from Ethan telling her to come to an "urgent staff meeting" at 8:30. That meant Javier, Ethan and Bea, since Angus, the chief horticulturist, was happily snorkeling in the Caribbean, not checking email since he was truly on vacation.

Did Ethan have news about the skeleton?

Her boss wasn't acting relieved when Bea and Javier slid into two chairs facing his big oak desk. His hair was most definitely combed into place this morning, and he looked at the two of them in silence for a couple of moments, with pursed lips. He kept tapping his pencil on a legal pad. Bea's attention wandered from the pencil to Ethan's wooden file cabinet, behind him and partially obscured by his desk. It looked like he had been search-

ing for something desperately. Drawers were open, files were hanging out. Ethan followed Bea's gaze to the cabinet, turned all the way around and looked at it, and said, "Yes, let's do discuss that."

He got up and walked to the filing cabinet, motioning for them to follow him, which they did. *What a mess.* Papers were scattered on the floor. Bea and Javier exchanged what they hoped was a barely noticeable, expressionless look, and waited.

"I pride myself on hiring people I can trust, and then trusting them to do their jobs," Ethan said, marking the word *trusting* with a pencil thrust.

This time, Bea and Javier exchanged a blatant look of shock.

Somebody had to reply. "What is your concern, Ethan?" Bea asked.

Her boss nodded toward the cabinet, and then returned his penetrating look at both of them.

"I don't think either of us understands," said Javier.

"Don't you." It was not a question.

"No, we don't," said Bea, with quite a bit more warmth than Ethan was showing.

"Well, let me enlighten you. Somebody broke into my file cabinet, and rifled through the personnel files."

"Ethan, I did not do that," Bea said.

"Neither did I," Javier rejoined quickly.

"And if either one of us had, do you think we'd leave our handiwork that obvious to you?" Bea asked.

"That did occur to me," Ethan said, and Bea thought the ice cubes in his voice had melted slightly.

"I don't think either one of us has anything to worry about in there, anyway, right?" Bea asked. *There can't be any dirt in there that Javier would want to see. Besides, he'd never break into a file cabinet. It was somebody else.*

Ethan seemed to have been thinking along the same lines. “That’s the odd thing. I don’t see why either one of you would have cause to do this. But on the other hand, who else would care?”

“Well, the only other person who’s ever worked here is Angus, and he’s on vacation,” Bea said. “Probably somebody thought you had valuables in there, Ethan.”

Ethan went back to his desk and sat down. “I’d prefer to be able to trust my staff. Nothing was taken from the file cabinet or anywhere else in my office, as far as I can tell. Check your own offices. I’ll tell Marcia about it. Let’s all get back to work.”

Bea and Javier raised their eyebrows at each other, but not until they were safely in the hall.

But Ethan called them back together an hour later.

“Marcia was kind enough to send me the forensic anthropologist’s report. That is, your cousin’s report,” he said, looking at Javier. He pulled up something on his computer. “The skeleton is an adult male, thirty-five to forty-five years old. He’s not an ancient man, given the relatively modern bits of clothing they found, not to mention a Mickey Mouse watch. They dated that to 1968. He was wearing a vintage Summer of Love tee shirt. It helps that things don’t disintegrate in the desert very fast. The cause of death *appears* to have been a blow to the back of the head with a blunt object.” He continued to read from the monitor, “‘Fracture lines reached suture lines because of the bone sinking down into the cranium.’ The man’s head was hit *around* the time of death, although he can’t be sure that it caused his death.”

Ethan stopped this recitation and looked away for a moment, then held their eyes. “I’m afraid the medical examiner will probably say that he was murdered.”

Bea sucked in her breath and Javier croaked “No!” at

the same instant. Then he looked down at his hands.

“Do the police have any idea who this person is?” Bea asked.

“No,” said Ethan coolly. “But there’s one more thing. Something that should help identify the skeleton. The man had a very dense bone formation right in the center of his forehead. It’s called a ‘button osteoma.’ About the size of a nickel.” Ethan formed a nickel-sized circle with his thumb and forefinger. “It would’ve looked like the guy had a bad... a really bad bump on the head, except that it would be normal skin color, and it wouldn’t go away.” Ethan stopped talking and looked at them.

“Well, that should help identify the guy,” Bea said, in what she hoped was a level tone of voice. Why was Ethan acting as though they knew something about this already?

Her boss continued. “The police haven’t found any records of a missing person with a button osteoma, but they’re just starting to look.”

“Well,” Javier began, keeping Ethan’s gaze. “I started working for Alan about twenty-eight years ago in the early eighties. That was a long time after the Summer of Love.”

“That was 1967. I wasn’t sure how long you’d worked for Alan,” Ethan said. He let go of the pencil he’d been gripping.

“But Alan and Liz *were* here forty years ago,” Bea said. She immediately wished she’d kept her mouth shut. A scandal involving their founders was *not* anything Ethan wanted to think about.

“I can’t believe that Alan had anything to do with this,” Javier said. He stopped and looked at his hands again. Maybe he was thinking about how much gardening those hands had done with Alan Shandley. They were big, callused hands, competent hands, hands you could trust to do things well.

“Let’s hope not,” Ethan said. “Okay, let’s really get back to work this time.”

“You remember that I have the afternoon off, right Ethan?” Bea asked.

“Lucky you,” he said. She wasn’t going to let his negativity or even another possible murder spoil her weekend, damn it.