

NOT EVERY RIVER

by

Robbi McCoy

CHAPTER ONE

Matt sat cross-legged with his eyes closed, sunlight shimmering on his silver hair, looking like a sage from any bygone culture, but mostly like a Native American shaman. His straight nose and rounded face hinted at his Quechan heritage, diluted by several generations into a negligible percentage. Still, if not for his clothes, this modern man would be indistinguishable from his distant ancestors. Set against the backdrop of the Arizona desert, he might be a twenty-first century archeologist telling a story or a sixteenth-century medicine man on a vision quest.

“The deer,” he said, continuing his tale, “downed by a single arrow through its neck, fell on the spot. The man ran up and stared for a moment at the animal’s wild eye, observing the last second of its life. The deer acknowledged the hunter with a slow blink, then the glint of life was gone and the black eye saw nothing.”

Randi sat motionless on her warm slab of granite, listening to the story.

“The man knelt beside the animal,” Matt said, his voice assuming the slow cadence of his ancestors. “He said a prayer to the spirit of the deer, thanking it for giving its life for the man’s family. Then he lifted it to his shoulders and walked east toward home.”

Matt opened his eyes and rearranged his legs, glancing at Randi with a benign smile and a

pronounced squint against the bright sunshine.

“That happened right there,” he said in his regular voice, pointing to the bottom of the wash.

Randi nodded, suppressing a grin. “You don’t say.”

“Yep, right there where that triangular boulder sits. That boulder was there then just as it is now, exactly the same. That’s how I saw it. That’s how he saw it. Nothing has changed in four hundred years.”

She was used to this. Matt told many such stories, claiming to be recalling the memories of his ancestors. He didn’t want to think that all that living was lost. Randi understood the feeling. Inheriting the memories of all those who came before was a much more direct way of remembering the past than trying to figure it out from artifacts that were left behind. Rock art and shards of pottery left so many questions unanswered and so many individuals without faces or voices. He wanted to keep those people alive somehow. That was the fundamental purpose of archaeology, after all, at least if you really felt it in your heart, to bring a dead culture back to life. Randi knew this channeling of Matt’s was, in his opinion, part of his job.

And how could anybody argue? It wasn’t so unlikely that a hunter had killed a deer right there at some point in history. It was even likely, given all of the hunters and all of the deer over the last several centuries.

A noisy crow cawed at them from the branch of a mesquite tree. Matt turned to look at it.

"You see," he said, "The crow heralds a new beginning. Change is coming and we have to take advantage of the opportunities it brings us. It would be a mistake to ignore that."

He’s in quite the contemplative frame of mind today, Randi thought.

"I think the crow is just angry at Breeze," she said, pointing to her Doberman who was nosing around in the wash.

It didn’t take a cackling bird to tell Randi that change was coming. Matt's retirement papers

were more than enough to get that message across.

“I’m going to stretch my legs a little before we get going,” he said, standing.

“Okay. I think I’ll just stay here and soak in the view.”

Randi stretched out on her stomach facing Rainbow Wash, her chin resting on her crossed arms, her hat pushed back off her forehead. This was one of her favorite spots, named for the variegated colors of its soil, a small canyon through reddish conglomerate, carrying its rainy-day run-off west to the Colorado River. At the moment it was bone dry, as it almost always was. Yuma, Arizona got only a couple of inches of rain a year, so when there was water here it was a mere trickle.

Down below, Breeze sniffed methodically from one intriguing object to the next, taking no notice of the indignant crow. Just across the wash, on a dirt road, her vehicle was parked, a white Chevy Tahoe with a Bureau of Land Management insignia on the side, same as the one on her sleeve, the upside-down triangle with its snow-covered peak, blue river flowing through a green valley, dark green pine tree in the foreground. BLM’s national logo was definitely not a scene from Arizona, but it was someone’s idea of a natural paradise. Not hers. Randi’s idea of paradise was the view that lay before her.

It was a perfect January day, clear and mild, with a timid suggestion of wind. The views were better than usual. On the western horizon, a meandering ribbon of green marked the course of the Colorado River and the California border. Beyond that was Picacho Peak, the volcanic neck that anchored Picacho State Park, and to the north were the Chocolate Mountains. From here, they looked like bare rock jutting up from the desert floor. They weren’t really bare, though. There were low-growing, struggling plants covering those mountains, living at the barest of subsistence levels, like some of the human desert dwellers that she’d come to know and respect in the last couple of years.

The desert is deceptive like that, she reflected. At first you see nothing but a desolate landscape, but the longer you look, the more you see. Life, including human life, is sparse, but it's there. As you watch, the few who live there start to materialize out of the shimmering heat waves like a mirage. That's how she had come to know the small congregation of permanent inhabitants in her territory, gradually, as they made themselves visible to her.

She glanced at her watch and sighed. Her mood would have matched the weather if not for the impending arrival of their visitor, due in an hour. As she turned onto her side, propping her head up with her hand, she slowly became aware that she was being watched. When her eyes finally found that other pair of eyes in a shady alcove only ten feet away, the hair on her neck stood up and a chill raced through her. Funny how a snake can make your body turn on all of its defenses—a rush of primordial fear grips you before you're even aware of what you're looking at.

The rattler was coiled in a dark crevice, its head slightly extended toward her so that its snout was in the sunlight, its tongue flicking. As if the snake knew exactly when Randi became aware of it, it now began to sound its chilling warning.

Her body tensed in every muscle as she slowly removed her right hand from under her head and touched it down to the rock. Then she carefully pushed herself back along the ledge, inching away from the snake. Easy, she thought, speaking to both herself and the snake, reminding herself of the need to make no sudden moves, as contrary as that was to her impulse to flee. Her stare held tightly to the snake's eyes as she increased the distance between them, inching backwards until she knew she was far enough away that a strike was not possible. Then she stood and scrambled down the side of the outcrop, a little too quickly, though the danger was past. She dropped down into the wash, then ran across the gravel bed to the other side, climbing out.

Breeze, thinking they were playing, came running past and bounded up the bank ahead of

her.

Randi leaned against the side of her truck as the tempo of her heartbeat returned to normal. As she reached through the open window to grab a pack of gum from the dashboard, she heard the hollow sound of a voice on the radio. It was Steve, her supervisor. "Randall, Randall, come in," he said, his voice impatient.

She left the gum where it was and grabbed the microphone. "I'm here."

"I need you back at the office. Dr. Gatlin will be here at one o' clock."

"Right. Don't worry. I'll be there."

She replaced the microphone. He must think I'm going to bail on him, she thought. Oh, well, that wouldn't be totally out of character. Maybe he had justification for thinking that. Dr. Gatlin, the archeologist from California, was here to do a survey of the Black Point petroglyphs. Randi was still angry over that decision. The best way to protect such a site was to keep it a secret. Once the world at large got wind of how well-preserved and extensive the petroglyphs were, the place would be overrun with rock art tourists, some of whom would help themselves to a piece of it.

Unfortunately, that had already happened a couple of times, even as isolated as the site was. That was why, she had been told, a detailed survey by a qualified scientist was necessary. Even without publicity, the site was in danger. So, when they had been contacted by the University of California, the request seemed like a timely one. More and more people were becoming aware of Black Point. Randi knew well enough how many times someone had come into the office asking for directions to the site. It was becoming a really tricky situation.

"Come on, boy," Randi said to Breeze, holding the door open for him. "Time to go." Then she waved to Matt and watched his stride become more purposeful in response. Matt's thin, denim-covered legs carried him smoothly through the rocky stream bed and up onto the road

where Randi waited. He was smiling, his face a web of deep creases, as he held his hand out, palm up, to show her a small animal skull, bleached, intact except for two clean holes in the frontal bone where some predator had sunk its canines.

“Kit fox?” Randi asked.

“That’d be my guess.”

She took the skull gently in her hand and turned it over.

“I thought you could use this for your diorama,” he said.

“Yes. You’re right. Nice addition. Thanks.” She found a rag behind the seat and wrapped the skull in it. “We need to get back. Thanks for coming out here with me. Just like old times. I’m going to miss this.”

Matt smiled a calm, sympathetic smile.

Randi normally came to Rainbow Wash alone, but when she was in a mood for company in a place like this, there would be no one she would consider asking other than Matt. He had a companionable way of blending into the landscape.

Once the three of them were in the truck, Randi eased it through loose sand and onto a solid, washboard road, heading toward town.

“You sure you don’t want to come in for this meeting?” she asked, returning to a topic she had brought up during lunch. She had hoped to persuade him to come back to the office with her for the meeting with Dr. Gatlin.

“I’m retired, remember?”

“Not officially. Not until June.”

“Why do you want me there?” Matt threw an arm around Breeze, who sat on the seat between them, looking content, tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

“Just to show that we know what we’re doing. I mean, you know Black Point better than

anybody. You could talk about the rock art in her language, like a pro.”

“She’ll want to draw her own conclusions,” Matt said, raising his voice over the clatter of the truck. “Don’t worry, Randi, I’m sure she’s qualified.”

“I’m not really worried about that.”

“You’re worried she’ll think we’re backwater bumpkins?”

Randi nodded. “Doesn’t it bug you that a stranger is coming in to do this? I mean, it’s yours. It’s been yours for decades.”

“Never was mine. That site belongs to everybody and nobody. The Pima think it’s theirs too. The Tohono O’odham, same thing. Doesn’t belong to anybody. Belongs to history. Besides, I’m all for anybody who can appreciate it.”

“But she’s going to steal the glory.”

“If I’d wanted glory, I would have done the survey myself years ago. In a way, I’m a kind of lazy archaeologist. I figure I’m doing my job just watching them, keeping them safe. It’s important work, though, to document them. Even if there were no vandals, time itself would take them from us, eventually. This is a good thing, Randi, despite how you feel about it.”

Dr. Gatlin may be qualified, Randi thought, in the sense that she had the credentials, but she couldn’t possibly have Matt’s spiritual link to the land and the people of the past. In addition to her spiritual defects, Randi had also assigned her a long list of physical defects as well, imagining this Dr. Gatlin as an irritating person with a unibrow, a snorting laugh and a large, hairy mole somewhere highly visible. There was also a good chance, Randi was certain, that Dr. Gatlin would address her as “my dear” in a most condescending tone, like an imperious British dowager.

Once they made it to the paved highway and the outskirts of town, wild desert gave way to flat sandy tracts choked with miles and miles of recreational vehicles, hulking white homes on

wheels inhabited by retired Americans and Canadians migrating for the winter—snowbirds, tens of thousands of them, temporary residents, all squawking and hopping about in the sunshine like a flock of ecstatic cranes.

This was the sunniest place on the planet according to local propaganda. In winter, it was a sanctuary for all of these northerners. In summer, it forced people to seclude themselves in their air-conditioned refuges for several months. That was about all she had known about Yuma two years ago, that it was a parched desert town just north of the Mexican border and just east of California, a place you drove through on your way to San Diego or Los Angeles and got out of fast.

Having come from Phoenix, Randi was familiar enough with the Arizona sun. The heat hadn't scared her. The idea of a small town, though small only in summer, hadn't scared her either. Starting over had scared her. Being alone in a new place with a new job, being single and friendless and away from her family, that had scared her.

It had been the right decision, though, she reflected, to take the BLM job and move here two years ago. Things had worked out after all. And Phoenix was only three hours away. Parents and siblings were there when she wanted them, but not so close they were breathing down her neck. As for the others, old friends and ex-lovers, it was better not to be constantly reminded of embarrassing situations and catastrophic mistakes. Why she fared so badly in the romance department, Randi couldn't say. She seemed to always make wrong choices, hooking up with the most inappropriate people, as if there were some disaster-seeking homing device in her brain. That was one of the reasons she had steered clear of romance altogether since coming here. The other reason was that she was protecting herself, protecting her fragile state of tranquility. There was too much at stake to take chances on maybes. The next time she took a chance on love, it would have to be a sure thing.

Even if she had no lover in Yuma, Randi was happy. She had friends. She'd become an integral part of the community. Life was easy and comfortable. Nobody here knew anything about her messed up past. She was respected and trusted—owned a house, for Christ's sake! She was a pillar of the community. She liked who she was now and didn't miss her previous life with its drama and disappointments, not to mention hangovers and half-remembered midnight sex-capades. She was lucky to have made it through all of that relatively intact.

Unfortunately, her last relationship had not made it through. Perhaps the only relationship that had not been a mistake. Irene. Ultimately, though, that too had ended in disaster. Not Irene's fault. Randi easily took all the blame for that. It was Irene, or the loss of Irene, that had finally driven Randi to quit drinking, to return to college for her Master's degree, to leave Phoenix and embark on a new chapter in her story.

"Thanks for the picnic," Matt said as they approached his house. "That reminds me. You guys planning on giving me some kind of retirement party?"

Randi grinned and winked at him. "See you later, Matt."

"You know I don't want any fuss. You know that, Randi. You won't let them make a fuss, will you?"

"Tell Barb hi for me."

He shook his head and opened the door, stepping out of the truck. Breeze moved over to the passenger side of the seat and hung his head out the window.

"See ya," Matt said, turning to walk up to his front door. Randi smiled after him, then headed toward her own house.

"Now it's your turn," she said to Breeze. She thought, as she often had, that he was sufficient companionship for now. They made a good team. She had rescued him from certain destruction shortly after her arrival in Yuma. He had been an unpredictable, damaged animal,

unsuitable as a pet, a victim of stupid, irresponsible owners. Against friendly advice, she'd decided to save him, to attempt it anyway. It had taken a while, a lot of work, but it had paid off. He was now well-adjusted and happy, and the two of them had built a deep mutual trust during their many hours of training, which would form the basis, Randi hoped, of their eventual inclusion in the local search and rescue team. From worthless animal to SAR dog was her goal for Breeze, and it seemed well within reach at the moment.

Randi identified with Breeze. It seemed like they had both arrived in this place in the same condition, beaten down and aimless. Together they had realized their potential and become a success story. She was tremendously proud of that dog and of her part in his transformation. Her feelings about Breeze paralleled her feelings about herself. She had rescued herself, too, from the brink of destruction.

As soon as she dropped him off at home, she was back in the truck and on her way to the office with barely enough time to make it by one o' clock. Just as well, she thought. I'm in no hurry to meet this gatecrasher anyway. Let her wait.

Part of her resentment, she knew, was that Dr. Gatlin reminded her that Matt would soon be gone. His retirement would be a transition from one era to the next, and she didn't see how it could be a positive one. Whoever replaced him at BLM could not possibly do justice to the legacy of the past like he had. This visit from the California archeologist was the first step toward that new era where cultural artifacts would be treated as lifeless bits of clay, stone, and bone. They would lose their spirit, their stories and their life force.

This was an odd way of thinking for a geologist, Randi knew, since her own field of study involved only inanimate objects and by its very nature was thoroughly detached from humanity. But she didn't see any incompatibility between her science and her respect for the remarkable accomplishments of the human race. After all, the human race was living on the planet, had

adapted to thrive on it, and, ultimately, was made of the same stuff as the lifeless mud, no matter what theory of evolution or creation you adhered to. Randi liked the idea of that. The soil and the living stuff on it were mineralogically equivalent. I'm made of carbon, nitrogen, calcium, sodium and iron, Randi thought with satisfaction, with a little gold and uranium thrown in, just like the earth's crust.

She was in the middle of town now, waiting in a long line of RVs at a stoplight.

"Damn snowbirds," she muttered.

The only good thing about the unbearable heat of summer was that it drove away all of these lightweights. Those left behind were the hardy denizens who called this place home year-round. Like any other group of people who faced hardship together, the Yumans, in all of their diversity, came together as a community with a common foe—heat. Randi had valued this sense of kinship from the beginning. That spirit of community and good will was one of the most appealing traits of this town. Anywhere you went, you could be sure of a smile and a friendly greeting. Yes, it really was like that here.