



Praise for Appalachian Paradise

by Maggie Bishop

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Athletic career woman meets good-ole-boy for a five-day backpacking trek in the rugged North Carolina mountains. Appalachian born Wes triggers Suzanne's resentment and her desire amongst boars, bears and Girl Scouts. Suzanne's pack and old hurts lighten as Wes' easy charm helps her truly see the hope and allure of spring flowers, love and forgiveness.

This Appalachian hiking novel is a good read for any vacation – beach, mountains or back yard.

Critical Praise:

Maggie Bishop brings a vast knowledge of the Appalachian region . . . displays the unique ability to draw the reader into each setting with vivid description, to the point that the reader feels part of the scene. . . . well-paced, the characters deftly drawn, the chemistry . . . searing, and the romantic story teasing enough to leave the reader anxiously waiting for "the moment". – Christy Tillery French, *Midwest Book*

Review

[D]elightful romance with strong main characters the reader will grow to like and admire. . . . Their hike through the mountains is the perfect time for love to bloom amidst the calm and beauty of the Appalachians, vividly described in colorful detail.

– Astrid Kinn, *Romance Reviews Today*

[R]omantic adventure that will touch your heart in all the right places. Ms. Bishop

spins a beautiful love story that will make you laugh, cry, and sigh. It's about redemption, renewal, hope and taking a chance on finding the partner of your dreams if you're willing to take a chance on love. I'm putting APPALACHIAN PARADISE on my keeper shelf to reread whenever I need a lift. Yes, it's that good!

– Suzanne Coleburn, *The Belles and Beaux of Romance*

Maggie Bishop's novel "Appalachian Paradise" is a romance that gets off to a good start and maintains an exciting tension that manages to carry to the end. . . . A good part of Bishop's success is the set-up she's engineered.

– Rob Neufeld, *Asheville Citizen -Times*

A devil-may-care hero, a feisty heroine and rich Appalachian flavor combine to make Maggie Bishop's first romance a rewarding read.— Karen Rose Smith, award-winning author of 40+ romance novels.

. . . humorous, endearing. . . romance blooms as profusely as the Rhododendron and leaves you begging for more.— B.J. Foster, award winning author of *Bayou Shadows*

Wish you could spend days trekking over pristine North Carolina mountains? Put your feet up, instead, and follow this pair on their Appalachian climb with camp-out nights, bear sightings, and love-making under the stars.— Marian Coe, award-winning author of *Once Upon a Different Time*

Along the trail, Wes and Suzanne quarrel, bicker, banter, tease, learn, and, in the course of natural science, fall in love (and lust). Suzanne's flaws are such that we root for her to work them out, for Wes to wake her up, and for both of them to make each other happy. I can think of few better ways to spend a snowy day. A wonderful

Mountain Beach Book. – *Carolina Mountain Living*

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APPALACHIAN PARADISE by Maggie Bishop

PROLOGUE

"You want my daughter's safety to depend on the outcome of a hand of poker?" Billy Bowers whispered to his brother.

John Bowers drained his glass and put it down, adding to the rings on the scarred game table. "Any better ideas? Wes doesn't have a stake in her welfare. He's got no reason to agree. This'll give him one." John shuffled the cards. "*Damn* that Suzanne. She may be my niece but I'll still call her the most bull-headed woman alive."

Billy craned his neck toward the stairs but saw no sign of Wes. "At least she's talkin' to you. She hasn't spoken to me in ten years."

The two of them turned and raised questioning eyebrows at Conard, Wes' brother-in-law.

"I'll play along," Conard said. "He's pulled a few stunts on me over the years."

Wes returned from the bathroom upstairs and settled in his chair. Tallest and youngest of the four, Wes wore jeans, a faded Appalachian State University t-shirt and leather work boots. "You guys finish stacking the deck while I was gone?"

"Who us?" Billy said, wiping his hands on his Hawaiian shirt, then realized Wes was kidding about the cards. "Would we set you up like that?"

"I'm innocent," Conard said.

John dealt the cards, and the four men sat poker-faced playing the hand. Wes added the winings to his meager stack of ones and finished his Budweiser.

"Have you talked to Suzanne lately?" Billy leaned back from the scarred oak table.

John shifted in his chair. "A few days ago. You know she's been working too hard since that promotion. Sounded like hell."

"Gets that from her mother – working hard I mean – obviously not from me." Billy sipped the last of his iced tea and John continued to shuffle. "I worry about her, you know. Wish I could do something to help her."

Wes glanced between the two older men and shook his head. "You guys are just alike. I don't care how different you look. Both of you *determined* to do all you can for little Miss Independent. From your stories, Suzanne doesn't need or want your help." Wes shook his empty can. "I've never met the woman but I know more about her than you to do. Leave her *alone*."

These weekly poker games at Wes' house might be the only way for Billy to catch up on his daughter, but enough was enough.

"That's right Billy," John said. "Beat yourself up for something that happened a long time ago."

"I need a refill." Wes got up from his chair. "Anyone need something to drink?"

"I'll take one." Conard saluted his brother-in-law with his empty can. He was a round-faced guy with sandy hair and ready wit. Conard sported an Atlanta Braves t-shirt which he would sooner die than part with, though Wes' sister had threatened to throw it away for years.

"I'll take care of my own." John grabbed his glass, drained the ice into his mouth, and followed Wes upstairs to the kitchen sink. He pulled his own bottle of single-malt scotch from the cabinet.

Wes took two beers and a pitcher of sweet tea from the refrigerator. "That hard stuff'll kill you, old man."

"Not before my niece gives me a heart attack. She's driving me crazy." John dumped meltwater from his glass. "Now she's got a crazy idea to use my place for a week's vacation."

"Your place is a mite isolated, isn't it? It's practically inside Pisgah National Forest. I mean, it's great for you and your consulting – anywhere with internet will work – or for me when I want to get away. What does she plan to do there?"

"That's not the half of it. She's only using my place for a jumping off point. She's planning to hike for a week. Get this – she plans to 'walk the city grime off her body' as she put it. Her therapist told her to get away for a while." He poured himself a stiff one.

"Who's she going with?"

"Herself."

"You've got to be kidding."

They returned to the card table, and Wes handed the sweet tea pitcher to Billy and the other beer to Conard.

John continued, "Trouble is, I don't feel comfortable with her being alone in these mountains. Plus, it's harder than she thinks. She's can't hike that long -- five days, six to eight hours a day, steep rocky slopes. It's not like a jog around a track."

"She could fall and break something, Conard volunteered. "Then she'd be up a creek for sure."

"Exactly my point!" John brought down his fist for emphasis.

Billy poured the tea into his glass. "Her mother was independent -- or started out that way." He put the pitcher down and stared at the glass in front of him. "She should have left me, you know . . . I'm the reason she died early."

John sipped his drink. "Worrying over that doesn't help now. One day, you and Suzanne'll have to settle your differences. I'm sick and tired of being in the middle of your father-daughter mess."

Billy shifted in his chair. "She returns my letters unopened. She won't answer my calls, probably has that caller ID gadget. Doorman keeps me out of her building. You're more of a father to her than I am." He swallowed hard. "But, I still care about her."

"I'd as soon you dropped that sensitive stuff, Billy," Wes said. "You'll have me cryin' in my beer." He turned to John. "I don't like being alone on those trails anymore myself. I've got a friend who's a park ranger at Pisgah. I'll ask him to be on the lookout for her. When's she going?"

"Next month. May is early in the season, so there won't be many hikers out. I'd appreciate the park ranger being on the lookout. On top of everything else, the week she picked is the one I have to be in London." John played with the cards, absently cutting them repeatedly. "Didn't know how to say 'no'."

Wes gulped from his beer. "You going to deal those cards or make love to them?"

John dealt – slowly – but kept talking. "She only visited a few times and doesn't know the mountains. It's so like her to go to extremes. Her therapist suggested some time off, and she decided on a solo hike. She went on and on about the great maps she'd downloaded. – as if maps

are going to save her.”

They picked up their cards and John sized up his brother, cleared his throat, then asked Wes, “Where are you going while they finish changing your barn into offices?”

Wes considered his cards. “I’ll stay here for the barn changes, they start next week. I’ll spend a few days helping Conard here and Mary do some work on their house and hit a hotel for a few more days when they start on this place. The contractor swears he can do the kitchen and baths in two weeks. Can’t stay here then – well, I guess I could bunk down here.” Wes glanced around at the basement game room. It had been added to his family’s home in the early 80s and it was the one part of the house not involved in the remodeling. “But there’s no bath, I can’t get any work done while the computer equipment is being installed, it would just drive me nuts to hang around and just watch.”

John tossed his ante into the middle. “Why don’t you stay at my cabin?” He maintained perfect deadpan as Billy and Conard, watched, fascinated. “Plenty of room. Better yet, you could go hiking with Suzanne. The timing’s right.”

Wes yelped and slapped down his cards. “Oh, no, you don’t. Kindly leave me out of this. The way you tell it, she’s not fun, always has a schedule, and has definite opinions on all subjects. Not my type at all. I’d rather stay longer with my sisters. No thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” John shrugged, rearranging a card in his hand. “Still, it seems like you’d be willing to help out with something this important. Since you’re not doing anything that week anyway.”

“It would only be a few days, and you like to hike.” Billy chimed in.

John added, “Suzanne’s not unpleasant, exactly, just prefers computers to people. She wouldn’t be bad company. I’ve seen you with your three sisters. You know how to gentle and kid women to get your way.”

Wes groaned. “Don’t ask me to do this. She aims to go by herself, she doesn’t want company, she doesn’t like you interfering in her life.”

“You’re right. We’ll have to make it look accidental.” John’s face lit up as he warmed to the idea. “You’ll just happen to be there at the same time. She won’t have a chance to say ‘no’.”

“Yea, that’s a super idea,” Wes muttered. “Hi, Suzanne. I just happen to be here, so let’s go camping together! Yeah, she’ll love that.”

“It could work,” Billy said.

“Forget it guys. Get somebody else to . . . Suzanne-sit. I’m out of it.”

“Who else could I get?” John said. “You know your way around the mountains. You’ve got that southern respect for women. I trust you.”

“That’s not what I meant. She won’t like it no matter how you put it. Right, Conard?” Wes looked to his brother-in-law for support. “*Right, Conard?*”

“Un. . . Sure.” Conard glanced from one man’s face to another. Then he inspected the tabletop in front of him. “Of course, she *might* come to be glad you’re there. I mean if she gets in trouble.” He snuck a glance at Wes who glowered at him.

“I’ve got it!” John’s eyebrows shot up. He squinted at the younger man across the table from him. “Let me sweeten the pot a little. Double or nothing. You win, I pay you double. You lose, and you take a hike.”

“The pot’s not that big.” Wes squirmed in his chair. He wanted none of this. “Look, I understand both her need for independence and your desire to protect her. But . . .”

John dealt the cards. "At the end of the week, you could bring her to your Mother's Day cookout. Billy will be there. You could help pull them together."

"I haven't agreed to anything. You're trying to push me the same way you do Suzanne. No wonder she doesn't like it." Wes took in Billy's hopeful expression and smothered a groan.

"It's a good way to re-introduce them," John continued. "You could talk to her during the hike and smooth the way. Great idea! Glad I thought of it." John grinned at Wes. "Place your bets, boys."

CHAPTER 1

Suzanne unloaded the groceries, checking each bag as she hung the plastic handles over her hand. She snagged the Mast General Store bag from the trunk of her Accord, and surveyed her uncle's cabin.

Disgraceful.

A rampant wisteria vine, heavy with purple blooms, was trying to devour the porch, and giant rhododendrons loaded with fat pink buds threatened to take over the entire property. Though it was springtime, and everything was fresh and green, there was something creepy about the place. Anything or anyone could be concealed in all that mess. It really was a burglary waiting to happen. She listened but heard only soft forest sounds. She was being silly. It was just the fog that made the forest seem forbidding, that made the surrounding mountains seem to loom threateningly on all sides. Still, this place needed the civilizing influence of a chain saw and weed whacker.

Just another depressing day in paradise.

She stuck her nose in the Mast Store bag and inhaled the rich odor of new leather then tramped up the steps to the porch. The beginning of success is having the proper equipment. Her new hiking boots were almost two hundred dollars, but cross trainers wouldn't give her feet enough support for a five-day hike. Might as well be pampered since she was following doctor's orders. Mid-weight Italian boots with Perwanger leather upper.

Inside the front door, she hung a left to the kitchen and set the bags on her uncle's the kitchen table. Carefully selected groceries for the hike included freeze-dried entrees, trail mix, instant coffee – Ugh – pancake mix, instant oatmeal, granola, hot cocoa mix, whole wheat bread, peanut butter and zipper baggies. She glanced around the spacious kitchen with its pine cabinets. No need to put most of this stuff away as it was going into her backpack.

Creak!

Suzanne froze. What was that noise? Had she left the radio on?

A chill traveled the length of her frame. A quick look around the kitchen revealed nothing unusual.

Waiting for another sound, she held her breath. The spring wind whistled through the trees. There were bound to be noises she wasn't used to hearing in her apartment in Baltimore. Probably just all those bushes brushing against the house. After all, she hadn't spent time alone in this house before, this way-back-in-the-woods place. Day two by herself and already she was jumpy. No doubt about it, she needed a vacation. *Some independent woman you are.*

She took the brown boots from their box and lifted one to her face to inhale the tangy aroma. The leather felt cool against her cheek. She set the boot side by side on the table admiring their sturdy stylishness, and unloaded her other bags. There was a backpacker's camp stove, a compact cooking set with utensils and flame-resistant potholders, flashlights with extra batteries, waterproof matches, water purification tablets, ultralight women's backpack with a quick-assembly tent and tarpaulin, first aid kit, compass, electronic and her cell phone.

While assembling the groceries for her hike, she decided tonight she'd splurge before

heading out for the unknown by having frozen pizza with extra veggies, two imported beers and a chocolate eclair for dessert. She removed one frozen eclair and stood on tiptoes to put the rest of the box in the freezer. She really should get around to reorganizing that before she left. Uncle John would be able to find things better if they were stacked in categories rather than just piled in a heap.

Suzanne stopped and listened. . . . Something wasn't quite right in the house. Absently, she picked up the boot. She rubbed the smooth leather of her new boots with her thumb.

Zzz.

It was not her imagination. Something in the living room. Boot gripped tightly in her hand, she crept to the archway and peeked around the corner.

Was that a foot hanging over the arm of the sofa? The sofa faced the fireplace, its back toward the kitchen. If only there were a mirror over the mantle. She held her breath and inched to the back of the sofa, careful not to trip on the braided throw run, peered over and gasped. A man lay there, sleeping.

I should call the police. But the house was deep in the mountains. It would take too long for them to get here. She could be dead or worse by then.

I'll get in my car and drive away. But he could steal all her new stuff and who knows what else. And he'd be gone in the woods by the time she returned with the police. She'd have to figure out how to handle this by herself.

Does Uncle John have a gun? But what would I do if I had one? I've never handled a gun, and if this guy's really dangerous, he'll only take it away and kill me.

I'm being silly, a dangerous burglar doesn't go to sleep in a house he's robbing.

Looking around, she saw a large pair of leather work boots and a ratty plaid flannel shirt draped over a chair. No guns or knives in sight, but no knapsack or car keys either. How had he gotten here? It didn't make sense.

He must be a homeless wanderer. His build suggested a laborer. His faded, stained jeans stretched over thighs. A steak of dirt marked on his biceps — arms as big as those of the self-absorbed body builders at the gym. His chest rose and fell rhythmically in sleep — naked except for a dusting of light brown hair. Dark stubble covered his square jaw and his shaggy brown hair needed cutting. He must be in his early thirties, about her own age. He was tall -- too long for the six-foot sofa. He would wake up with a pain in his neck if he stayed in that position too long.

She told herself to move farther away. Maybe if she fed him, he would leave peacefully. A thief wouldn't still be here, but she didn't have time or patience to coddle some homeless housebreaker.

He mumbled something.

Armed with her boot, Suzanne leaned over closer to figure out what he was saying. The rug slipped under her feet. "Ah!" Suzanne lost her balance, toppled over the back of the sofa, right on top of him.

"Umph!" He wrapped his arms around her, trapping her arms between their bodies. Her weapon clunked to the floor. She struggled to free herself.

Her lips brushed his.

Help! What's this? She pushed against him with no effect. The part of her mind still functioning told her she wasn't afraid of him — just indignant. *Think!* What had she learned in self-defense class? Watch for an opening.

She arched away from him, pinched him hard with both sets of fingers.

"Ow! You little she-devil!" He released her just as she pushed against him.

Losing balance, she tumbled off the sofa and crashed to the floor. All dignity was gone, but at least she was out of his grip.

"Thank you, Darlin', I appreciate the welcome."

"Welcome!" she sputtered. "How dare you? You kissed me – that's assault."

"Whoa! Who jumped on who here?" He rubbed his scruffy beard with the back of his hand.

"I fell. It was an accident." She stood up and glared at him. How dare he act so insolent, an intruder, probably breaking the law in a hundred other ways as well. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

His attitude was non-apologetic as he remained sprawled on the sofa and slowly cocked his left arm behind his head. "Didn't your uncle tell you?" He shook his head in mock despair. "That man is unreliable."

"What do you know about my uncle?" She stared down at him. A soft, southern accent. He was probably some lazy, good for nothing, somebody Uncle John hired to do chores. Uncle John was such a pushover.

"Explain yourself," she said, her voice low. She was back in control.

He swung his legs over the side of the sofa, sat up and stretched. Suzanne backed up a few steps and tried to keep focused on his face. Now that she had the situation in hand, she was determined to maintain her stern attitude.

He finished his leisurely stretch, lowered his arms and shook his shoulders. He reminded her of a horse shaking off a fly. It was time to shake him off and out of her uncle's house. She put her hands on her hips and waited.

"John's a long-time poker buddy of mine. He told me I could spend the week here since I needed a place to stay. He mentioned a sweet-tempered niece who'd love some company." His smile slipped a little. His eyes clouded. Uncertainty flickered.

She blinked and his cocky smile was back.

"I see. And what are you supposed to do with this sweet-tempered niece?" Too late she realized the question sounded flirtatious.

"Enjoy the scenery." His gaze took in her short brown hair, the frown lines between her eyebrows, the square set of her shoulders. He smiled as his gaze roamed over her compact body, white t-shirt over firm, medium-sized breasts, snug jeans over the flare of her hips, down slim legs. He made eye contact. "It looks good from here."

Suzanne's body tingled everywhere his eyes had traveled. *Ridiculous!* She shifted her feet and bent to pick up her dropped boot. "What if I don't want to share this house with anyone?"

"You don't have to. I'll go find somewhere else to stay." He continued to look directly into her eyes, not pleading but asking -- controlling -- with a gaze that wouldn't let go.

Flustered, Suzanne massaged the leather and stared out the living room window while silently debating her decision. Who could think with him watching her? She glared back. "What right did you have to grab me and kiss me?"

"You startled me. I had to protect myself." He gestured to the boot. "Besides, *you* kissed *me*."

On the offensive again, her first impulse was to defend her choice of weapon, but she

tamped it down. "Who are you?"

He stood up, wiped his palms on his jeans and extended his right hand. "Weston Fox Watson Avery, at your service."

Her eyes narrowed at the long list of names. "Someone had big expectations for you," she said, thinking that his parents must be disappointed in his current lifestyle.

"I'm the youngest after three sisters. Somebody had to carry on the family names."

Her own hand disappeared in his big palm, rough with calluses. He put his other hand over hers, enclosing it in warmth.

"I suppose you're a handyman by trade, Mr. Avery."

"My father was Mr. Avery. I'm known by my friends as Wes."

"You realize, uh, Weston, I'll call my uncle and confirm what you said." She removed her hand from his and backed away.

"I'm sure John'll tell you all about it. He told me that I could hide out here for a while." He gestured toward the sofa. "Sorry about making myself at home but the ole' eyelids closed down on me." His ready smile flashed again. "Guess I coulda napped in my truck out back."

Suzanne hugged the boot in front of her. "It's early in the evening in London. John might be in his hotel." Even if this man did have permission to be here, she would never forgive Uncle John for putting her in this predicament.

Wes rubbed his hand over his chest and Suzanne's gaze tracked its movements.

"I'm smellin' a mite rich. Mind if I take a shower now?"

She jerked her gaze back to his. With a curt nod, she pointed the way. He grabbed his duffel bag from the other end of the sofa and sauntered down the hall.

She plopped down on the sofa, pulled Uncle John's itinerary from under the phone and dialed the number. Busy. She forcefully directed her thoughts away from Wes in the shower.

It was the spring of her restlessness. She couldn't be still. She had to keep moving, keep planning, keep the stillness away. Imagine the audacity of her therapist to prescribe -- no virtually order -- her on vacation. "Get away," she had said. "Go to the beach or the mountains. Get back to nature. Allow yourself to pause."

"Pausing" wasn't working. Yesterday, after her eight hour drive from Baltimore, she rearranged everything in Uncle John's kitchen cabinets. Now he'd be able to find things. The same way in his linen closet. This afternoon, she'd tackle the freezer. Anything to keep busy before tomorrow's hike.

Now what was *that* noise? He's singing in the shower. The screen door slapped behind her as she escaped to the porch. Too bad she couldn't tidy up the outdoors as well. This wisteria Uncle John had let take over the porch had new tendrils trailing along the railing, up the support post, and headed to the roof. The rhododendron bushes needed trimming to give the house some breathing space. They were already so thick they hid Weston's truck.

I ought to take another look at those trail maps I printed off the internet. Wonder what's taking him so long in the shower. Get busy, girl. Try Uncle John's number again.