



Midwest Book Review

An established must-read romance author, Maggie Bishop has crossed into the mystery genre with finesse. Her latest novel is packed with suspense around a tightly-woven plot which begins with the poisoning of dogs and escalates to the murder of a local man. Throughout, she deliciously teases the reader with the bristly attraction between the investigating detective and the woman who found the dead man's body and who just might be a suspect. Set against the beautiful backdrop of Boone, North Carolina, with engaging characters, red herrings at every turn, and a galvanizing story line, this is a must-have, must-read. Highly recommended.

----**Christy Tillery French**, Reviewer, Author

"Maggie Bishop's *Murder at Blue Falls* will send chills down your spine as cold as the North Carolina Mountains in February."-- **B. J. Foster**, award winning author of *Bayou Shadows*.

"As I read through, I've become aware of how well she's built Jemma's character -- particularly the visual aesthetic sense and sense of adventure that makes her a keen observer, both as a photographer and a sleuth...It's very well done and I'm impressed." -- **Judy Geary**, author of *Getorix*, a mystery in Ancient Rome

Blue Falls Ranch Schedule of Events

Sunday - Guests arrive, settle in room and relax

4:00 Wine and cheese and ranch tour

Monday

9:00 Riding Orientation and trail ride to introduce guests to horses

2:00 Trail ride along Elk Creek to East Ridge

Non Riders, meet at 1:00 to visit downtown Boone and ASU's Turchin Art Center

Evening - sunset hike, game room

Tuesday

9:00 Trail ride to Tail Feather Cove

2:00 Trail ride to Racoon Run

Non riders, meet at front desk at 1:00 to visit Jefferson frescoes

Evening - movie and popcorn

Wednesday

9:00 Trail ride past Racoon Run to ridge

2:00 Trail ride to Rhymer Hill

Non riders, meet at front desk at 1:00 for Blue Ridge Parkway bike ride

Evening - Steak cookout with mountain music with Brian Hicks and our own Wrangler Bo

Thursday

9:00 Trail ride to Secret Location

2:00 Trail ride to Deer Springs

Non riders, meet at front desk 9:30 for Grandfather Mtn. Biosphere visit

Evening - Square Dancing in dining room, costumes available

Friday

9:30 All day trail ride and picnic to Whisky Ridge

Non riders, visit Cone Mansion on Blue Ridge Parkway, Grandfather Trout & Gem stop

Evening - Local storyteller tell Jane Tales by camp fire

Saturday

8:00 All day trail ride with breakfast cookout to Blue Falls waterfall

Non riders, visit Valley Crucis Craft Fair and/or Woolly Worm Festival

Evening - Gymkana Competition

Sunday-Morning check out and hugs goodbye

Pick up your photo CD

CHARACTER LIST

Blue Falls Ranch

Jemma Chase - Trail Leader, daughter of ranch owners

Detective Tucker

Detective Graves

Alma - Aunt who is chef

Father- Don Chase, ranch owner

Mother-Virginia Chase, ranch owner

Brandy - chestnut mare

Bo - wrangler on Visa (he's a charger)

Joe White - farrier

Rhonda Lea Thompson - next door neighbor with two children, dog poisoned

Junior Thompson - next door neighbor

Randy Kincaid - across the road neighbor who hunts

Josh - over the mountain neighbor who hunts, Christmas tree farm owner

"Slick" Stanley Jones - up the road neighbor, former skate boarder

Sam Bowman - nearby neighbor

Jesse & Kurt Sheets - down the road neighbors known as The Brothers

Ranch guests: Sally on Handsome

Kim on Oops!

Maggie on Star

Bob on Bunyon

Chapter 1

Who poisoned the dogs? kept repeating in Jemma Chase's head as wrangler Bo dropped her off at the Watauga County Sheriff's office, located at the jail on Queen Street in Boone, North Carolina. On this October Monday, errand day, clouds scuttled across an otherwise clear sky. Cool air blew in from the northwest to these Appalachian mountains. *Why would someone do that to an animal? It's one thing to poison a person, but a dog?*

Jemma trudged up the cracked cement steps and into the block building. The small waiting room floor was covered with peel and stick square vinyl tiles. One vending machine, one pay phone, a tiny table with two plastic chairs, and a small bulletin board with three bail bondsmen's business cards thumb tacked were illuminated by a florescent ceiling fixture that blinked dim every few seconds. She swallowed hard and spoke through a metal grated window to talk to two armed guards.

One of them emerged to lead her down a barren hallway, past four jail cells one with a man sleeping on a bunk, and into a back office crowded with two desks and two chairs were crammed. One desk held papers stacked in distinct piles, pens at attention in a coffee mug. Citations and Certificates of Achievement were propped up three deep on top of a bookcase mounted on the wall above the desk. A boxy CTR monitor displayed a screen saver of intricate puzzles being filled in, the keyboard was free of the grime present on the other desk's keyboard. In contrast, the other work space's paper stacks defied the laws of gravity. The guard brought in a folding chair and indicated as he left that she sit on one of the desk chairs. She sat with her back to the disheveled pile. Her senses were on heightened alert, her heart beat loudly in her ears.

Two men walked in carrying cups of coffee.

"Would you like some coffee, Miss Chase?" the younger one asked as he sat at the next desk and swivelled around his chair to face her. He looked to be in good shape, short dark hair, quick smile. Collared shirt, tie, pistol in a holster at his hip.

"No. Nothing, thanks." Jemma sat up straighter with both feet firmly on the floor.

"I'm Detective Tucker and this is Detective Graves." Graves settled into the folding chair, and crossed his leg, ankle on the opposite knee.

Detective Tucker leaned forward. "We appreciate you coming in here and talking to us. I know there's a ton of things you'd sooner be doing –"

Mucking out the stables seemed more appealing at the moment, Jemma thought. She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"So I'll get to it. You've heard about the dog poisonings out your way. We wondered if you could shed any light on what's happening."

"Nothing more than what my parents told you." Jemma sat tall to keep from shaking.

"I see." Detective Tucker sipped his coffee. Detective Graves doodled on a legal pad propped on his leg. "Let me back up a bit. Is the Blue Falls Ranch your official address?"

"Yes." Jemma clasp her hands together on her lap.

Detective Graves wrote on the legal pad.

"Where did you move from?"

"How is that relevant?" She glanced at the other detective, at the progressive puzzle on the computer screen, then focused on Detective Tucker.

"Now, now Miss Chase," Graves interjected, "no need to be jumpy. We're fillin' in a report."

His attempt at being fatherly irritated Jemma. She opted to let the irritation go. "Colorado Springs, five years ago. My parents moved here fifteen years ago. Dad wanted horses, Mom wanted a Bed and Breakfast--and me, I just want peace." She looked at her hands and resisted the impulse to pick at a ragged cuticle.

Detective Tucker asked her a few other simple questions for his report. He seemed to be studying her every move, so she willed herself to be calm. Police interrogation wasn't new to her.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I work at the ranch, lead trial rides, help in the kitchen. I also do carpentry work."

Detective Tucker's eyes widened. "Bet that comes in handy. You'll have lots of work around here with all the new construction going on."

She nodded. "I mainly fix things at the ranch. I'm rebuilding the old house I stay in." She unclenched her fingers.

"I understand you had a run-in with your neighbor."

Jemma licked her lips. "Not really. I asked Rhonda Lea to stop her son from driving his four-wheeler on our property. He was tearing up our horse trails."

"You want to tell me about it?" Detective Tucker put his cup on his desk. Detective Graves stopped doodling.

"There's not much to tell. When she started to deny it, I asked her to meet me at the trail that runs near her property so I could show her. They own a couple of acres next door. She works for DOT, Department of Transportation. She and her twelve year old son came. I don't know where her daughter was. I showed them where he had worn a trail from her property to meet up with our trail. Twenty or so yards of the trail was rutted so deep that water stood in the tire tracks. Our horses now have to avoid those areas. We don't want their legs to be injured walking in that muck. The son had spooked a group of riders a few days before and I had trouble calming down our guests as well as the horses. You have no idea how hard it is to reassure twenty-six horses."

"I understand he'd been on those trails before and no one had said anything."

"That was because he used to walk the trails, not spin wheelies on them. I wanted to put a stop to it even though Dad didn't want to annoy the neighbors. You know how folks around here can hold a grudge."

"You got that right," Detective Graves said. "Part of the old mountain ways."

"Her family's been here since the 1800s so she takes every slight as a major offense."

Detective Tucker leaned back in his chair. "So, then what happened?" He nodded in encouragement.

"Rhonda Lea's son grabbed her hand and tried to get her to leave. Rhonda Lea's almost as tall as I am but wiry, thin as barbed wire. Her face got red and she started screaming like a wild cat accusing me of hating her." Jemma paused to bring her voice back down to normal. "I have no idea where that came from. I barely know her. I went over once for coffee at her invitation but we

didn't hit it off. She's got a family to take care of and I don't. We don't have anything in common. I thought she was a nice enough lady, but I'm not looking for high-maintenance friends."

"What do you mean by that?" Detective Tucker asked, his tone friendly.

"Rhonda Lea's one of those ladies that recounts all the moments in her life, no matter how minor the event or small the detail. She's a drama queen. She likes to know what all the neighbors are doing, she wants regular visits. I know she's on medication, but her temper is not under control."

"Would you tell me about the morning you learned about the dogs?"

"In detail?"

"Tell us everything," Detective Graves added.

Jemma looked from face to face. The detectives looked open and friendly, like the guests at morning breakfast at the ranch. Curious but not concerned. Jemma let her mind set the scene. She thought about coming in from greeting the dawn. Nothing stirred—no breeze, no bees—on that foggy morning. Brandy's *whinney* floated in the mountain air. The lake of fog in the valley surrounded and concealed all living things it was so thick. It was one of those mornings you had to roll down the window if you drove to an intersection and listen for oncoming vehicles. You couldn't see ten feet. It had been an unseasonably warm week.

"Early morning the phone rang. It was Rhonda Lea. I said no, I hadn't seen the dog, but that I'd take a walk around and look. I walked to the creek and headed toward the neighbor's place. It made sense that an animal would head for water if it didn't head home. Eventually I came to the Thompson's driveway. Rhonda Lea was there, at the culvert.

"'We found him,' Rhonda Lea said and glared at me. Rhonda Lea's husband rushed the bundled up dog to his truck.

"'Is he okay?' I asked, even though she scowled at me.

"'I don't think so. We're heading to the vet,' Rhonda Lea said.

"Rhonda Lea called the next day. The dog'd been poisoned by an antifreeze-laced hamburger, or it could have been Christmas tree poisons, she managed to get out between sobs. The vet couldn't be sure which it was without an autopsy. She said they found a half-chewed fast food wrapper on the border between her house and Blue Falls Ranch. Within days, the dead dog count in the valley was up to twenty-one. Both of our dogs were fine.

"Speculation abounded. Everyone had antifreeze. Was it a hunter prepping for deer season? A neighbor tired of driving through packs of dogs? That crazy kid who had had an aneurism years ago?—he hadn'd been the same since.

"Thank goodness horses are vegetarians, I remember thinking. And that the guest ranch horse barn is so far off the public road. A few hours later, my parents told me that detectives had stopped by and talked to them about the dog poisonings. They'd said it was a puzzler and asked if I'd mind dropping by the office next time I went to Boone. So here I am." Jemma remained more relaxed than she expected. Detective Graves reminded her of a kindly uncle she didn't have.

Detective Graves cleared his throat. "That was a fine rendition, almost like you'd practiced it."

Jemma sat up, slightly alarmed at the potential meaning behind his words. "I've been thinking about that morning. I've been haunted about the cruelty to the dogs. It was a mean thing to do."

"It was that." Detective Graves tapped his note pad.

"Rhonda Lea has problems I don't need to get involved with."

"I understand you have some problems yourself." Detective Tucker cocked an eyebrow.

"Don't we all." Jemma shifted in her seat. "I wasn't guilty that time either."

"Oh?" Detective Tucker's eyes flickered with interest.

"Picked up for DUI. I only had two drinks. That skunk with me jerked the wheel."

Jemma's heart sank. They hadn't known. "That's when I came East and moved in at my parents ranch." Detective Tucker's face froze. What had she said to cause that?

The detectives glanced at each other. Detective Tucker looked directly into Jemma's eyes. "Did you poison those dogs?"

"No! Why would I do that? I love animals. I even move spiders from inside the house and not kill them. . . Did Rhonda Lea accuse me?" Blood drained from her face. "You think I poisoned her dogs and the others in the neighborhood as revenge for her son riding on our land. Doesn't that sound weak to you?" Jemma willed herself calm and lowered her voice. They were trained to read body language and she had nothing to hide.

"Why weren't your ranch dogs poisoned?" Detective Tucker leaned forward.

"I don't know. They stay away from the road, spend more time with the horses." Jemma's hands curled into fists on her lap.

"How come you knew where the dog was?"

"I live and work with horses and dogs. I know how they react. If I were hurt, I'd head for water." Oh, no, it's happening again. Stampeded into looking guilty.

Detective Tucker leaned back and let the silence drag out. "Would you take a polygraph test?"

"Yes." Jemma met his stare. "You must be desperate if you think I harmed those dogs. Revenge is not my style. It just makes things worse." Her mouth went dry. She should have asked for water.

Detective Graves said, "Miss Chase, we are not accusing you of anything. You came in here on your own free will. We appreciate your wanting to help. I gotta tell you, this is upsetting to all of us. Can you tell me something about the other neighbors?"

Jemma shook her head. "Not really. Look. I keep busy at the ranch. This is our high season. The fall leaf-lookers book early. I can keep an ear out. There aren't any stores or regular restaurants in the valley so our ranch has morphed into a place where locals come for breakfast."

"I've stopped in for coffee and pie of an afternoon," said Detective Graves.

"Alma will serve up whatever is available to eat to anyone at anytime. It makes us rumor central for Triplett. Rhonda Lea and Junior had a guy living with them for a while, it was rumored that he sold drugs. Maybe he was mad when he moved out. He lives further up the valley, comes in to the ranch for breakfast sometimes. I'm sure she mentioned him." Jemma looked at Detective Graves, not trusting herself to look at Detective Tucker. He may not have it in for her personally but his manner changed dramatically when she'd mentioned that stupid DUI. It's not like she'd stolen something or killed anyone. Her crime was in a choice of friend. "Be careful of Rhonda Lea's temper. She's the type of clannish woman who brings out the worst in people. Picture yourself yelling at the top of your lungs and finding out she can yell louder." Jemma shook her head at the memory. "There's a rage burning in that woman. I feel sorry for her daughter and son."

"If you think of anything, you'll let us know?" Detective Graves asked.

"Sure. This has to be a hard one to investigate." Jemma accepted his card.

"Thank you for talking with us." Detective Tucker stood and held out his hand. Jemma stood and shook it. He was her height, six-feet. Firm handshake. That much registered as she was escorted back to the front door.

Tucker stared at the door after she left. "She's guilty, has to be."

"What makes you say that?" Graves rearranged the chairs so he could belly up to his desk. "The odds of solving this one are about as good as clearing all the copperheads out of the valley of Triplett."

Tucker half-smiled and sat in his well-worn desk chair. "She handled the whole thing too well, as if she'd rehearsed it. Why, she barely reacted to my direct question about doin' in the dogs. She didn't even cry. Half the women we bring in here tear-up before we even get started."

"You want to build a case because you didn't shake her?" Graves shook his head. "I saw your eyes blaze when your old enemy DUI came up. Don't deny it."

Tucker stretched to work out a kink in his shoulders. "We've been working together too long."

Graves shrugged. "When do you want to talk to her again? We need to cruise down that way, the petty thieves are back in business."

"You don't suppose she's involved with that?"

"Dog killings, stealing in broad daylight—she could be a one woman crime wave."

Tucker saw the smile Graves tried to hide. "Cut it out. You have to admit, it would be convenient." Tucker tapped a pen on the desk. "She was hiding something even though she didn't cross her arms or legs. Her eye movements didn't indicate any answers she had to make up." Carpenter, huh? She's used to working around men and has access to lots of homes and businesses. She's already made an enemy out of her neighbor. She's definitely not from around here. Need to check deeper into her record.

Graves pulled out the incident report. "We've interviewed most everyone in the valley that are full time residence including the Chases who own the dude ranch, the Bishops who work at Sugar Mountain, the Tates who are friendly neighbors, and now Jemma—hated neighbor. Sheriff's already grumbling that we're spending too many man-hours on this."

"We still have the Sheets brothers and Randy Kincaid to interview." Tucker said.

Graves repeatedly tapped his pen on his desk. "For all we know, Rhonda Lea Thompson or her husband did it themselves. Maybe their dog was too hard to handle."

"It's such a vicious crime. Poor defenseless dogs. It's heartbreaking to the dog owners." He'd considered having a dog himself but figured it wouldn't be fair to the dog. He'd fallen into the habit of working more hours than necessary. "Sheriff's right, though, we'll have to move on soon." Tucker wrote his report but left out that Jemma was tall and lanky. She had to be strong from carpentry work and riding horses every day. When was the last time he had ridden a horse? He needed to visit the farm more often. Dad always had a horse or two around. Granddad often told stories of building Tweetsie in the 1920s when horses and mules were the only power they had. He needed to visit the farm more often..

Walking tall on the outside, Jemma exhaled and drooped as soon as the door closed behind her and she was again in the free air.

The shakes set in. She glanced to her left toward the library, the meeting point with her ride, wrangler Bo. She reached the bottom of the chipped cement jail steps and her feet went ahead one block to King Street where some of the college town bars were. She stopped in front of Murphy's—not for their barbeque, even though it was good. She stared at the glass door, feet rooted on the sidewalk.

Characters who spent their days around old town Boone barely registered in her mind as they walked by her. Seventies college students who never left, never moved beyond their hippie days. A white boy with dreadlocks and bare feet said “excuse me” as he sauntered around her. Those earth biscuits had kids, and got food stamps and free medicine, courtesy of Jemma's taxes. They were American gypsies without the charm. Jemma had worked on a rental house where the owner had to evict the original three people plus the other six they had invited to live with them. All in all, it was four kids, five adults, three big dogs and a rabbit that had the run of the house. Jemma's job was to rebuild doorways, install new windows and replace counter tops. The house stank for days, even after the carpet was ripped out.

Jemma felt like one of those bronze statues set in public squares. The shaking had stopped but her mind had been elsewhere, nowhere. What was she doing here? How had she arrived? More important, why would someone want to do in dogs?

An elderly couple walked by and looked away. The bar wasn't what she needed.

She turned east but jerked her head at the honk of a horn. Bo pulled over and she stepped up into the pickup.

“You look sadder than that dog I was talking to a while ago.” Bo shifted a package on the seat between them.

“I needed to hear that.” Jemma fastened her seat belt.

“Man, I would have joined you in Murphy's. I could use a beer about now. I hit three stores before I found what your dad needed. Sure miss Farmer's Hardware.”

“It's too early for me to drink. I'm down to drinking only a few nights a week.”

Bo glanced at her before turning into a break in traffic. “No skin off my nose. A little drinkin' never hurt anybody.”

“I know why you drink. Look at you. Closin' in on fifty, drink every night. Broke every bone in your body in your rodeo days.”

“Hey, don't take it out on me. I didn't make you talk to the cops.”

Jemma reached over and tugged his seat belt. “Sorry 'bout that. Guess I didn't fare as well as I'd hoped.”

“What do you mean?” Bo stopped at a red light.

“They act like I killed those dogs.”

“No way. They must be desperate. No wonder you headed for a bar.”

“But I didn't go in the door.”

“Yeah? Well, I'll drink one for you.” Bo grinned and crept along in the slow line of traffic. October town traffic was heavy with leaf-looking tourists and fall semester college students.

Jemma snorted. “Like that'll help. What am I gonna do if the real bad guy isn't caught?”

“You’ll have to figure out who did it.” He stopped and let an ASU student jay-walk across the street.

“Right. I’ll ask Rhonda Lea if she did it just to blame me for it. Then she’d burn my cabin down for spite.” Jemma couldn’t believe she’d uttered those words.

“She’s not that bad. You two are like two bears with one trash can—each complaining about the other.” Bo stopped again to let a car with Florida tags pull out from a parallel parking space.

“That’s not true. I avoid any contact with her. She called me.”

“Correction—she called the ranch and you answered.” Bo had a self-satisfied smile when Jemma dropped her head. “I could ask around to see if anyone knows anything. Not much though. I don’t want them to haul me in.”

Jemma nodded. “Thanks.”