



Midwest Book Review

Maggie Bishop once more unveils a treasure-trove of information about the Appalachian region as well as the sport of snow skiing. The familial connection between characters from Ms. Bishop's first book, *Appalachian Paradise*, and this one will, for some readers, feel like visiting old friends. The author skillfully builds the story, with enticing characters and sweet romance, then offers impending doom to a relationship the reader has been rooting for, leaving a spiraling sense of anticipation until the end of the story. An engrossing read, one the reader will not want to put down.

Christy Tillery French, Reviewer

Rapid River Monthly

Author Maggie Bishop has written a book the equal of any of the popular fiction nicknamed "Chick Lit" that is a staple in bookstands everywhere. Emeralds in the Snow could easily compete with any of the romance genre found on Best Seller Lists.

Smoky Mountain News, Enterprise Mountaineer.

Review by JC Walkup

The book is a fun, fast read that leaves the reader wanting to know more about emeralds, how they were mined and what became of them. The obsession for the gems could use more development. The characters are clearly drawn. A sequel is in order to find out more about the stones and the process of turning them into money, the people and who they become. These are the kind of characters who shape the world around them and readers enjoy that kind of development. Readers can look forward to her next one.

EMERALDS IN THE SNOW

by Maggie Bishop

PROLOGUE

Everett Graham cursed under his breath as his freshly-detailed blue Cadillac bounced sharply along the rutted road, kicking up a billowing cloud of dust behind it. This trip grew more irritating every time he made it. He longed to send an asphalt truck in here to pave the damned thing over, complete with gutters and a convenient cul-de-sac. But, of course, that would defeat the whole idea of secrecy.

At last he spotted the familiar rusty pickup, where the road seemed to disappear into brush and old-growth forest. At least it confirmed that Tucker was here.

"I'll have to get a load of gravel dumped out here before I come again," Graham said to himself as he eased his belly out from behind the steering wheel. "I wonder if Tucker has any relatives who could spread it, or if I should hire that done too. Damn, forty-five's too old to go traipsing around in the backwoods." Graham was, in fact, fifty-five.

He hefted himself wheezing out of the low-slung Cadillac, closing the door and zapping the locks. Another zap popped the trunk open. Bracing himself along the car's side, Graham struggled over rocks and ruts to get to it. He pulled out his camouflage hunting jacket and shrugged it on, pulling the zipper halfway up over his paunch.

His custom-built deer rifle was one of many in his collection. He caressed its satin-like, hand-carved cherry stock. Even window-dressing had to be of the finest quality on the market when it belonged to Everett Graham. He patted the hunting jacket's chest pocket to be sure his map was there. It was, of course. He liked to be sure of things.

He fished a couple of shells out of another pocket, slid the bolt back and pressed them one at a time into the magazine. He had never actually seen a bear on any of his forays into these god forsaken woods but Tucker insisted they were there, and it paid to be prepared.

Everett surveyed the open woodland of oak, hickory, locust. If the road ran any further into the trees, it was long since overgrown. Tucker's trail began somewhere in here, and the only way to find it was to know where it started. Graham squinted into the underbrush. White blooms of wild cherry gleamed through the dense shade like a signpost, pointing to the creek. Graham plunged into the thick underbrush. He'd done this plenty of times before.

Spring rains and melting snow had swollen the stream into a boisterous cataract that buffeted and swamped a line of stones across it. Graham scanned the map and then the line of trees on the other side of the creek. No sense stepping into that icy water before he had to. Ahh, there it was. The deer-rub scar on that oak tree. Sure sign of the deer trail he was looking for. He dipped the toe of a well-greased boot into the water like a timid non-swimmer.

Following the trail was easy for about a mile. He stopped suddenly at the sound of a rustle. As he slipped the rifle off his back, he looked around. He hadn't really hunted in years, but the old instincts were still there. He positioned the stock butt against his shoulder, just in case. There, in a thicket, a buck bounded away from him. He slipped off the safety and put the deer in his sights. Just as he was about to squeeze the trigger, he stopped. He'd have to dress the thing and lug it out. It was not deer season. Just too much trouble. This whole trip was that way. Must be getting lazy. He returned his attention to following the trail.

His partner, Tucker, was cagy and secretive, just like all the old Appalachian mountain people who scraped out a living. Tucker'd rather walk these miles. Wouldn't do this the easy way, on a horse or a dirt bike. No, he had to do like he suspected Tucker's daddy did when he ran a still – always on the watch for someone to do him dirty. Grudgingly, Graham supposed he had the right idea. But it was still a damned pain in the neck.

Everett's roots were here, too, but in town, not back in the woods. Pulling a fast one on Tucker was almost better than winning in the stock market. Out-foxing the fox, so to speak.

Graham had just about enough of those trashy Tuckers. They'd been in this area a long time, like his family, but they were peculiar and cantankerous, keeping to themselves back in the hollers, and quick to shoot perceived intruders. They were all poor as dirt and stubborn as mules, a trifling, unseemly lot he would never have associated himself with – if it hadn't been for the emerald mine. And even now, his association with them was a closely-guarded secret. No one knew the source of his vast fortune, not even family. Folks in the area believed he was some kind of stock market genius, and he was pleased to cultivate that illusion. The truth was, ten years ago he had agreed to pay Tucker's back property taxes in return for a share of the mine Tucker had been working on his property. Tucker did all the manual labor, excavating the gems and turning them over to his partner to be sold through a New York agent and the profits invested. It was a good deal for both, as the agreement went. Of course, it was true that Graham had taken to borrowing from Tucker's share to fund his own ventures and comforts. The way he figured it, Tucker was too busy to notice and really had little need for or appreciation of wealth anyway. Graham, on the other hand, had grown up with means and needed to maintain a certain level of style. Surely a reasonable person would understand that. Anyway, he would correct the books once that Beta Max stock went up and nobody would be the wiser. In truth, Tucker was lucky to have him looking after things.

Everett never had been able to memorize the twists and turns on his twice-a-year trek. He'd been walking for well over an hour when he reached another creek. He'd always hated this part, but there was no way to cross except balancing on the downed locust. Bacon and egg breakfasts at Boone Drug and afternoon deal-making bourbons took a toll on his laid-back body. He put the map in his pocket, slung his rifle over his shoulder, and took a deep breath. The wet bark was slick. He grimaced as he went down on all fours. He'd have to practically hug the damn tree to cross.

Bet Tucker scampered across like a squirrel, hang him. Knees weren't made to balance on. Once across, Everett picked up his pace. He turned and zigzagged up the hill with only four stops to catch his breath. Past the old homestead, across another creek, he braced himself for the last push.

Everett hitched up his creased Carharts, now covered with dust and tree-slime, and faced the endless climb, huffing and puffing, up a rocky mound. He picked his way up the loose stones left over from Tucker's digging out the mountain to get at the emeralds. The last batch were

clear enough to be valued as highly as stones coming out of Colombia. A little fancy bookkeeping would keep Tucker's share a mite short. As stones crunched beneath his boots, he felt more justified that he'd fudged the numbers. In fact, he felt under-compensated.

"'Bout time you got here," Olin Tucker called. He propped a shovel against the wooden beams framing the mine entrance. He waited there casually, hands in his overall pockets, as Graham gutted out the last of the climb and then bent over, gasping, to catch his breath.

Everett stood at the top of the heap, dusted off his hands and pants, then shook Tucker's hand. "This trip gets harder every year."

"Sure enough. I keep pulling out more of the mountain and dumping it down the side. Sit a spell and catch your breath." The mountaineer sat on a boulder and poured them each a cup of coffee from a battered Thermos. They talked about the weather, the mountain form of social talk, before getting down to business.

"I know it's my idea to keep our meetings secret, but this hike in here is tough for me."

Tucker nodded. "It's the onlyest way I know to show you how hard I work for my share."

"I'm not in as good a shape as you are." Everett envied Olin's lean and limber body but not the labor required to keep it that way. The dust in Tucker's thick grey eyebrows and on his scraggly beard prompted Everett to rub his hand over his own clean-shaven face. "The accountant's still working on the profit statements. We're both doing fair, but most of it's tied up in stocks and bonds."

"So about how much do we have?" Tucker studied Graham's face. "Are we millionaires?"

Everett nodded.

Tucker stood and walked to the edge of the heap of tailings before turning to face him. "Four hundred dollars a month ain't cuttin' it. I want to change our contract." Tucker paced along the edge, rubbing his bristly chin. "Now, you've done a good job investing the rest of my half and I thank ye for upholdin' your end. A million dollars is fine for me. I want to cash out. I'm ready to retire and spend time with my wife and grandson. Lucky's gettin' big now."

Everett froze inside. Trapped. Tucker had every right to his own money. A nightmare of financial transactions played through his head. Their combined assets, all in Everett's name, had been his collateral in all his business deals over the years. He stood and nodded, buying time to think. "I know what you mean. I wish I could spend more time with my granddaughter. Emerald gets prettier every day. When did you want to start wrapping up this operation?"

"The sooner the better. I ain't getting any younger," Tucker looked across the valley with his back to Everett. "There's still emeralds aplenty here. You can go after 'em if you want to. I got all I need."

"Listen to reason, man." Graham heard himself babbling, pleading, with this bumpkin who suddenly threatened to ruin him utterly. "You know I have no talent for physical labor. I'm a businessman. We had a deal, you and I."

Tucker glanced at him then returned his gaze to the valley. "Aw, come on, Everett. You know I held up my end. But I can't dig forever in this rockpile. I got a grandson that hardly knows his grandpap. And you, don't you want to spend more time with your granddaughter?"

"Sure, sure." Graham wasn't fond of children, but Emerald was a bright little girl and he was rather proud of her. That was entirely beside the point. Or maybe it was the point. This fortune he had built – through his own dear effort, mind you – was her inheritance. Why, you might even say he'd done it all for her sake. He wasn't about to let some son of a moonshiner rob his grandchild of her inheritance. Then the questions from brokers, from his family and from the

community rang loudly in Everett's head. There was no way he could pull this off and keep his social and financial standing. He couldn't give up half of his wealth.

He couldn't do it. Pain flashed in his forehead. A blaze of red burned in his eyes. Shaking, he stood and stared at Tucker's back. All his heart registered in that instant was the threat. He'd be found out. He'd have to cash in his part of the stocks at a loss just to cough up half of what Tucker had coming. Time. He needed time for the stocks to recover. *He can't do this to me – to Emerald!*

He closed his eyes to blot out the sight of wiping out his empire. Before he knew it, the rifle was off his shoulder and in his hands. He opened his eyes and raised the sight.

Graham squeezed the trigger. The jolt to his shoulder registered in his memory to be replayed at odd moments for the rest of his life.

CHAPTER 1

"If I live through this," Emerald Graham vowed, "I'll stay on the bunny slope forever." Pain, intense as a red hot poker, ran through her leg, and her knee throbbed. "Hey!" she squealed and threw up her hands to ward off the icy spray as some bratty kid made a parallel turn just above her.

Skiers plummeted past on the hard-packed snow. Sugar Mountain, North Carolina. Tom Terrific, the black diamond slope. Their looks of annoyance confirmed what her rather spectacular fall and the pain in her left knee already told her. Grandfather was right. It's only worth the risk if you don't get caught.

She'd really gotten caught this time.

She lifted one of her hands off the snow to brace her knee and knew immediately it was a mistake. Gravity was not on her side. The earth moved. Correction, she moved, slid a few inches. Her heart thudded in her chest. She automatically calculated the grade of the slope below her -- sixty degrees, if she discounted the big bumps. What were the odds of her getting down this North Carolina mountain in one piece?

"O-o-o-h! N-o-o-o..." Sliding and screaming, she went for long seconds down the steep incline. She had nothing to grab on to. Plowing her good heel into the snow as a brake only managed to swing her around backwards.

She slid further, fear gathering in her stomach as her speed increased.

Thwack. Her back slammed into a bump, stopping her descent. Afraid to breathe, afraid to move, she squeezed her eyes shut to keep the tears from escaping.

The bump rumbled, like some deep-voiced person clearing his throat. "Hidy. I'm Lucky Tucker with the Ski Patrol. Kin I help you, ma'am?"

She nodded, keeping her eyes closed.

"What's your name?"

Her eyes flew open and she stared up at the broad shouldered, dark haired man in the red jacket towering over her. "Em," was all she could manage.

"The letter 'M'?"

"No, Sherlock, E-M," she spelled out. "Short for Emerald."

"The jewel of your father's heart, Dr. Watson?" He released his skis and propped them up in the snow beside them.

"More like my grandfather's." Despite the ache in her knee, she warmed to his bantering tone and smiled, then grimaced. "Are you my knight in shining armor?"

"More like Prince Charming in long johns. You hurtin'?" he asked, already taking off his bulky ski gloves and kneeling in the snow beside her.

"It feels like someone's hammering on my kneecap from the inside."

"Did you hit your head?"

When she replied that she wasn't sure, he ran his fingertip firmly back over her scalp.

"Oh."

"Did I hurt you?"

"Uh, no." Actually, as tense as she was from the fall, his massaging fingers sent a shudder of relief down her spine, but she wasn't about to tell him that.

He reached toward her leg, and she flinched. He picked up the ski lying next to her which had automatically released from her boot when she fell.

"Here's the other one," the bratty kid said after side stepping back up the hill. Em mentally retracted the "bratty."

"Thank you," she called as the boy skied away. The pain in her leg subsided a bit.

"First I need to cross these to let other skiers know to avoid us." He sidestepped uphill about twenty feet to jam the two skies into the snow, forming an X, and then returned, already asking questions. "What happened?"

"I think I crossed the ski tips and fell sideways -- twisting my knee."

"Did you hear or feel a popping noise?"

"No. Is that good or bad?"

"Good. I want to examine you just to be sure nothing else is wrong."

"Are we playing doctor?" She couldn't help herself; he was so professional, so country and so good-looking. And so poor, she added silently after spying his ski boots held together by duct tape.

"Hum," he said, then asked her to look straight into his eyes. He covered one of her eyes for a moment, then uncovered it. She assumed that her pupil contracted correctly. His eyes were such a deep blue that she couldn't tell if his pupils were dilated, but he certainly didn't seem to be responding to her.

When he repeated the procedure with the other eye, he brushed her forehead with the lightest of touches. Was that just an accident? His gaze traveled over her head and face and Em stared into his deep-set cobalt eyes. A Roman nose dominated his sun-browned square face and firm lips. He looked familiar. Surely they had gone to high school together if he was a local. Of course, Em took all the advanced courses while he was likely in the auto shop. For just a moment she was back in high school hugging her books to her chest hurrying past the hallway of the vocational classes, past the hooded eyes of the country boys leaning against the wall smoking. Had he been one of those?

"Do you like what you see?" she asked. Bravado had always been her defense of choice. She shook her head. It had been too long since her last date.

"Uh huh. No evident damage."

"I told you that. It's my knee that's hurt."

He palpated her leg from the hip to the ankle, giving extra gentle attention to the area around her knee. Even through the ski pants, his probing fingers heightened her senses.

His next questions were all business, designed, she was sure, to set her at ease. His movements were efficient, distant and professional without a hint of impropriety. So why did the places on her body tingle with the familiarity of a lover's touch after he had checked them? This was ridiculous! She would accept the next blind date some over-zealous colleague offered her.

"Feel this?" he asked as he tapped on the bottom of her ski boot.

"Yes, but I don't think I can straighten my leg."

"Can you wiggle your toes?"

Happy that her foot, at least, was in working order, she replied. "Yes. Does this mean I'll live?"

"If you behave yourself and do exactly what I say." He pulled out a pair of scissors.

She sucked in her breath. "Uh, can we not do that?" She looked away, a little embarrassed. "These ski pants are Bogners. I picked the color to match my eyes." Until recently, she'd never had to be concerned with money since the estate's accountant took care of paying all the bills. "And really . . . my knee is already feeling better."

"Well, I guess blood would show up pretty well on that bright green, and you don't seem to have a broken bone," he said, replacing the scissors in his pack. "A more thorough exam can wait."

"Thanks for the good news." Stiff from sitting, she knew she would creak if she moved. The packed snow froze her backside, the cold seeped up her body despite the expensive padding.

He called on his radio for a rescue sled. Just then, three men skied up and stopped.

"Hey, Cuz, you need any help?"

Lucky glanced their way. "Not your kind. I'm still suffering from your last visit. Go on. Git. Let me work in peace. This lady don't need any of your kind of attention."

"Grady here's only got a few days leave from the army. Are you goin' to treat your kin that way?"

Lucky sighed. "Em, these three ya-hoos are my cousins. They spent the night at my house. Grady's the stiff one, comes from 'yes sirrin' those officers. Clayton and Wes are local. Wes got married not long ago, so he's tamed down some."

"Think I can trust Lucky with my knee?" Em smiled at each of the men.

"Medically? Yeah. Otherwise, it's hard to say." Wes grinned then nodded to Lucky.

"Thanks for last night. This is our last run. 'Til next time." The three swooshed away in perfect form.

"Do that again and I'm pulling your ticket!" Lucky yelled after them.

"Back to business," Lucky said, shaking his head. "Why did you try Tom Terrific? It's one of the toughest slopes."

"Brilliant scholar that I am, I believed George when he said skiing is easy. He told me to take a left at the top of the mountain and to point those skis down the hill and let gravity do its thing. I have conditioned on a ski machine." At his knowing smile, she added, "You've heard this story before."

"You'd be amazed at the number of times. Is your boyfriend here today?"

"He's not my boyfriend, or even my friend after this. We're merely colleagues." Em shivered. "How much longer do we have to wait?"

"Another patroller will bring the sled soon. Where's your hat?"

"I didn't wear one. It would mess up my hair." At the telltale shake of his head, she added, "Another common mistake, I take it."

At the moment he nodded, a skier stopped near them. "Doctor Graham, are you okay?"

"I'm in capable hands, Kevin. Thanks for asking."

As he skied away, Lucky asked, "Medical?"

When she shook her head, he returned to the business at hand. She knew PhDs were a dime a dozen in this college town.

"We'll put a temporary splint on your knee, strap you in the sled, and take you down to the ski patrol first aid building. Get set for a few bumps on the ride."

"What? You don't have fluffy cushions in the sled to protect this fragile body?"

"No ma'am." Another red-jacketed patroller snowboarded down in front of a long, low, red metal sled. "Our main concern is to get you down quickly and safely."

"Lucky me," she murmured.

"I'm Lucky, you're Em. Remember?" He smiled at her before turning to brief the other patroller.

Em stared up at the dark-haired man who had rescued her. His eyes matched the clear, crisp, deep blue early January sky behind him. It might be interesting to get to know him better. So what if he was broke and local? He couldn't be worse than some of the blind dates she'd been on.

"We'll be as gentle as possible," he said, maneuvering a hinged padded splint on both sides of her left leg. "Your carriage awaits, milady, but we'll need your help getting you into it. Dean, my boss here, will lift your injured leg, and I'll grip under your shoulders and lift the rest of you. You'll have to hop up on your good leg."

"But I'll be facing uphill," she said, disturbed at the thought of not being able to see where she was going. That sensation had already happened to her once today.

He nodded. "The leg goes uphill to minimize further injury. Are you ready? On the count of three: one...two...three."

"You two have done this before," Emerald said as a way of complimenting the men as they laid her back and positioned Lucky's medical fanny pack under her head. They covered her with a blanket, placed her skis and poles beside her, and fastened her in with three straps. Before she could think of anything else to say, she whizzed backward down the slope at a much faster speed than she'd been willing, much less able, to ski.

"Whoa boy, whoa boy," she said, more to calm herself than to actually tell the men how to get her off the mountain. Bundled up skiers stared down at her as she passed them. The swirling wind tugged at her hair. Faster and faster she went, feeling only slight bumping through the cold metal shell. Some carriage, she thought, as her fingers curled into knots to control the terror of flying backwards. People appeared in her peripheral vision then swiftly shrank to the size of miniature dolls. Dean kept the rope taut behind the tail of the sled, snowboarding like he'd been born to it.

She could hear Lucky's skis cutting through the hard-packed snow when he turned, and she relaxed. They knew what they were doing. It reminded her of the sleigh rides she had taken at college in Canada, only she had faced the direction they headed and the horses responded when she called "whoa."

The ride ended at the bottom of the beginners' area -- easy to spot with so many people falling down. "Thank you, kind sir, for the ride," she said as Lucky loosened the restraining straps.

"My pleasure. To get you out of your carriage, we'll reverse the process and put you into this chair to wheel you inside. Ready?"

"Whoa! State of the art medical equipment?" Em stared doubtfully at what looked like a straight chair strapped to a hand truck like delivery men used.

"A regular wheel chair isn't maneuverable enough in these conditions. You'll be fine; just lean back and pretend you're a UPS package."

With his help, Emerald sat up, then awkwardly stepped on her good leg and fell into the chair. They paused inside the door. The walls were unpainted wood; the room was clean but well-used. Lucky wheeled her to a bed at the back of the long room and steadied her as she hopped

aboard. None of the other eight beds were occupied; Em guessed nobody else had been stupid enough to get hurt yet that day.

The fluorescent lights were unforgiving, highlighting the wet boot tracks on the industrial carpet beneath the chair wheels. Medical supplies lined the inside of a cabinet a patroller just opened. A white-haired woman sat at a desk discussing a form with another patroller.

"Is this normal?" she asked, indicating the empty beds.

"Sort of. Most accidents happen between three to four in the afternoon when the light goes flat. People are tired, but too caught up to stop skiing for the day. 'Course, a few have a couple of beers for the afternoon runs."

She felt better already. She shucked out of her ski jacket and draped it over the bottom of the cot.

"To keep that knee from swelling, we'll put an ice pack on it."

After she lay back in the bed with her splinted knee covered in ice, Lucky grabbed a clipboard and sat in the wooden chair beside her. "Do you want me to have this George guy paged?"

She shook her head. "I'm in my own car."

"OK, I have a few questions to ask you. . . ."

The questions ranged from address and telephone number to how many falls she'd had that day. The pain in her knee was almost gone. She eventually interrupted him with, "May I have a cup of coffee? I'm feeling much better now."

"We can only offer water in the patient area."

"Could we go somewhere else and finish with your questions? I'd love to buy you a cup of coffee. It's the least I can do." Now that she was safe and warm, she needed a pick-me-up.

"Our services are free but we do take donations to cover supplies." He pointed to a miniature foot cast with a dollar sign crudely drawn on it. But there was a twinkle in his eyes, and she knew he'd deliberately misunderstood her invitation.

"Let me put it another way -- I need a cup of coffee. Caffeine. The stronger the better. Where can we go?"

"What about your knee?"

"It doesn't hurt anymore. I'll prove it. Take off the splint and let me give it a try," she insisted over his protest. After he unbuckled the splint, she sat up and lowered her legs over the side of the bed.

Lucky grasped her upper arms to support her. "You should have your doctor examine that knee."

"I will, I promise. See," she said as she stood up and straightened her leg. She held her breath, afraid her bravado had betrayed her once again, but, remarkably, the knee did feel almost okay. "It's much better. Your healing fingers must have done the trick." When he released his firm grasp of her arms, she was almost sorry she had spoken so quickly. She straightened and tested her weight on the leg. It was stiff and sore, but the throbbing was gone.

With a tight hold on Lucky's arm, Em limped out of the patient area and into the ski patroller break room where the aroma of fresh brewed coffee greeted her. A mild locker room smell mixed with burnt toast lingered. Half eaten cake sat on one of the two tables. A handwritten notice was taped to the refrigerator "Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's food ((:."

Double racks of skis ran the length of the opposite wall. Boot heaters were plugged in at different points, some with boots attached. A blackboard listed initials and lunch break times for

the day. A big sign stated no use of cell phones while working. Another one said "Take things home with you. Pearle has been known to donate heavily to RAMs Rack."

"'Mountain three, patrollers zero.' What does that mean?"

Lucky glanced at the blackboard and shrugged. "Three of the pros have been hurt this year, and so far, the mountain is still undamaged."

"That's encouraging."