

S A P P H I R E 1 B R I D E S

A Treasure Concealed

TRACIE
PETERSON



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Tracie Peterson, *A Treasure Concealed*
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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Dedicated to Katie and Randy Gneiting
at Montana Gems in Columbus, Montana,
with much gratitude for their help in understanding
the reason Yogo sapphires are so special.

I appreciate the information you gave me regarding books to read and places to visit. Katie, thank you for answering my ten thousand questions with such patience, and thank you, Randy, for allowing me to watch you work with the stones. You are both amazing!



1

MONTANA, LATE AUGUST 1895

Mama?" Emily Carver whispered the word as she opened the door to her parents' bedroom.

Her mother looked peaceful. Her ragged breathing punctuated the otherwise silent house, giving Emily confidence that her mother was only sleeping and hadn't passed on. Closing the door with great care, Emily sighed.

She knew her mother's illness was terminal. The doctor had told her father it was probably only a matter of weeks before she would die, but he couldn't tell him why. Emily felt a tight clenching in her throat. Tears formed, but she blinked them back. She would have a good cry later—when her work was done and she could slip off to be alone. All of her life she'd had to be strong, and now was no different. Her unconventional upbringing amid the mining towns of the West had taught her to be tough and fearless. Well, almost fearless. She feared her mother's death.

I don't know what I'll do without her.

How would she ever manage without her mother? How could

she keep her spirits up without Mama to talk to? Throughout the years of her father's dragging them from one gold strike to another, Mama had always been there. And even though the last few years had proven to be too much physically for her mother to bear, Emily cherished her wisdom and comfort. It was impossible to imagine enduring this life without her.

But Mama never really wanted me to continue with this kind of life.

The thought did nothing to comfort Emily. Many had been the time when her mother had encouraged her to break away from the family. She had high hopes of Emily marrying and having a home, and God knew Emily longed for such things. She wanted a permanent home and family of her own more than she could express. The idea of living in one place she could call home was even more tantalizing than the idea of marriage.

Pulling on an old hat with one hand, Emily carefully tucked her long single braid up under it with the other. She tugged the broad brim down low, then felt to make certain every strand of her brown hair was concealed. Next, she checked the pocket of her overly large coat to find her pistol ready for whatever need she might have. She'd killed many a varmint with it and prided herself at being a good shot.

She looked once again at the door to her parents' room. Her mother slept more and more these days, and Emily knew she'd probably be back from town before Mama even noticed she was gone. Still, Emily hated to leave her. With Pa panning down at the river's edge, Emily knew he'd never hear if her mother called out for help.

"I need to be two people," she muttered and headed outside.

The sun bore down, making the cumbersome coat even more uncomfortable, but Emily didn't consider leaving it behind. She had learned quickly and at an early age that it was best she

conceal any hint of her gender and shapely figure. Most of the folks in Yogo City, Montana, knew she was a young woman, but they understood her need to be protected. From a distance the filthy coat disguised her age and gave a rather nondescript impression. This generally kept most of the men from bothering her. Most, but not all. A great many men didn't care what a woman looked like so long as she was . . . a woman. Mining towns were lonely places, and women were scarce.

Emily glanced down at her appearance. Her coat was only one of many ill-fitting pieces of clothing. Her skirt, under which she wore canvas duck pants rather than petticoats, was ragged and patched many times over. It had belonged to her mother long ago, but now it was one of only two Emily owned. Instead of a blouse, she wore an old flannel shirt of her father's, which hung long, nearly to mid-thigh. Wearing it in this fashion gave her a shapeless, odd look that suited her purpose. The only feminine articles she wore were a fine lawn chemise and a loosely tied corset. Of course, neither of those were visible. She hadn't wanted the addition of the corset, but after a time, she found that the bracing actually kept her back from aching so much at the end of the day.

She glanced up at the clear sky wishing there might be a sign of clouds to offer shade. There wasn't a single one set against the seemingly endless blue. The rolling hills and distant mountains stood out in stark contrast, but even those would offer little shelter from the heat.

Turning her attention back to the dirt trail, Emily tried to bolster her spirits. She thought of a poem by Theodore Tilton that was in one of her poetry books.

Once in Persia reigned a King,
Who upon his signet ring

Graved a maxim true and wise,
Which, if held before his eyes,
Gave him counsel, at a glance,
Fit for every change or chance:
Solemn words, and these are they:
“Even this shall pass away!”

But would it? Would this gypsy life—this endless road—
would it truly ever pass away?

The walk to town, if Yogo City could be called a town, would take no time at all. Emily could walk a fast pace, and her endurance did her proud. She could even walk the eighteen miles to Utica, the only real town near to this collection of miners and reprobates, in less than half a day. Once she'd had to do just that when her father had been away and her mother's pain medication had run out. It wasn't a trip she wanted to make again, however. There was no telling when a bear or some two-legged creature might try to complicate the journey.

Sweat trickled down her face. They'd lived in one part of Montana or another for the last few years, and generally the summers had been mild. This year was a blazer, as her father put it, and there was no end in sight. Emily pulled out a dark blue handkerchief and wiped her face and neck. It would be winter soon enough, and then everyone would complain about the cold.

She tucked the handkerchief away and gave a wave to one of the locals who sat whittling under the shade of a pine tree. The man claimed to be Scottish and called himself Rob Roy after some famous ancestor. Emily knew there was a book by Sir Walter Scott that told of that man, but as of yet she'd never come by a copy.

“Hot enough for you?” the man asked without pausing in his work.

“Reckon so.” She kept her voice low, almost gravelly. The man said nothing more but gave a nod. The heat left neither of them wanting to talk. The effort was just too great.

The friends they’d made here in Yogo City were good ones, and Emily knew they looked out for her and her mother. These few men were good to bring them extra game or offer up warnings about bear in the area. And Emily felt confident that when her father had to leave for several days, those same men were watching over them. No one had said a word about it, but the effort was there all the same. Of course, the area was hardly thick with people. Most of the population that had flooded the claims just a year earlier had moved on to more promising ground when the mother lode failed to be found.

But Pa won’t leave. He’s sure there’s gold here somewhere.

Just as he was always sure that God was about to help him strike it rich. Emily sighed once again and tried to put it from her mind. She wasn’t even sure that God knew where Yogo City, Montana, was, much less who lived there.

The landscape around her was dotted with pines and aspen, as well as tall wild grass and a wide variety of vegetation, which Emily gleaned for herbs that she could use in cooking and healing. However, in the dry heat of the late summer, most everything was brown or wilted. The river and creeks that flowed quite full in the spring were now low, making everyone’s life more challenging.

A mule and cart approached with one of the local miners at the helm. One-eyed Tom tipped his hat ever so slightly as his wagon kicked up a thick cloud of dirt. Emily nodded even as she tasted the dust upon her lips and felt it sting her eyes. She blinked several times, but it did little good. She muttered disgust at the heat and dust, then chided herself and decided she would do her best to endure such annoyances without complaint. Mama

always said that complaining was the easiest of goals for a person to accomplish. Refraining from such despair was far more difficult but would, in time, prove the merit of the man. Or woman, in her case.

Emily arrived at Millie Ringgold's place and stepped inside. The small building was a combination of saloon, grocery store, restaurant, and boardinghouse, and Millie was well known by one and all. Yogo City was, for all intents and purposes, Millie's town, and no one knew it as well as the former slave woman.

Emily blinked a few times, letting her eyes adjust to the darker room. An old black woman looked up from where she sat at a table and smiled, revealing the double row of front teeth for which Millie Ringgold was famous. "Goodness, chil', you look dressed for winter and covered in dust. You gwanna faint dead away wearin' all dat. Why don't you shed some of dem clothes?"

"I doubt that would be to my benefit. The heat is one thing, but having to fight off hooligans and their ideas for me would be even more difficult." She pulled the felt hat from her head and fanned herself with it. "There are too many lovestruck old men looking for a woman to ease their miseries."

Millie laughed. "Sho nuff, you's right on dat account. I gets offers to come tend 'em too. Seems dey ain't all dat particular." The old woman laughed and motioned for Emily to join her. "I gots some nice root beer here if you'd be wantin' a glass. Ain't cold, mind ya, but it's wet."

"No thanks, Millie. I just came to see if the laudanum arrived. Mama used all of hers, and if I have to walk to Utica to get more, I will." She ignored the perspiration that trickled down her neck.

"No sense doin' dat, chil'. I gots it this mornin'." Millie pushed up from the table and made her way behind the make-shift bar, where she sold watered-down whiskey and warm beer

to the miners. “I put it back here to save for ya.” She produced the bottle and handed it to Emily.

“Thank goodness. I had no desire to make that walk in this heat.” A grin cut across Emily’s face. “I’m afraid I might have had to shed an article of clothing every few miles and pick them up on the way back.”

Millie laughed and slapped her stout belly. “Now, wouldn’t dat have been a sight.”

Emily nodded. “Too much of one.” She turned for the door and stopped. “Did I pay you enough when I ordered this?”

“We’re square, chil’. In fact, take dis.” She came around the counter and went to the far side of the room, where shelves were lined with canned goods and other articles for sale. Millie returned with a can in her hand. “Dis be peaches. I know Mr. Henry likes ’em. Oh, and Jake says to tell yo he’ll be comin’ by with meat one of dese days. He was in here last night to say he means to shoot him another grizzly bear. He gots the record for the most, and aims to keep it dat way.”

Emily couldn’t help but laugh. “And Jake Hoover makes sure we all know it. Nevertheless, if he gets another one and wants to share a portion with us, that’ll be fine. Tell him I’ll be happy to use the fat to make us all some candles, even if bear fat does make the worst-smelling ones around.”

“Dat a fact,” Millie said, nodding. “Still ain’t gwanna be sensible to let it go to waste, no sir. ’Course Jake’ll sell it to grease wagon axles if nuttin’ else.”

Emily tucked the laudanum into her pocket and did likewise with the can of peaches. Her father would be pleased with the surprise. She secured her braid and hat before opening the door. “I’ll be bringing you eggs as soon as I can, Millie. The heat has the hens kind of slow in laying, but I expect things will pick up soon seeing how it’s almost September.”

“I’ll be here,” Millie said, flashing another toothy smile. “Ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

None of us are.

Emily bit back a comment and pulled the door open. The harsh Montana sun momentarily blinded her, but she knew the way well enough, and by the time she returned to the cabin, Emily found that her mother had awakened. The laudanum had come none too soon.

“I’ll get you a glass of water, Mama,” Emily said, pouring the medication into a wooden spoon. Her mother took the foul-tasting stuff without even a pretense of refusal. It used to be she wouldn’t take the medicine, hating the sleepy, drugged state it put her in. The fact that she took it almost eagerly now proved to Emily that the pain had grown far too great for her mother to try to be brave.

She fetched the water and helped the sick woman hold it while she took several sips. “I wish it could be cold for you, Mama.” Emily straightened with the glass. “I’m afraid, however, there’s nothing even remotely cool about these days.”

“It has been horribly hot, but at least the nights cool down,” her mother replied, falling back against the pillow. “If a person wanted to avoid hell for no other reason than the heat, I would understand it.”

Emily smiled. “I’m going to wet down this sheet for you.” She lifted the cloth from her mother’s body. The woman looked so tiny in her cotton nightgown. It was as if she were disappearing a little each day. Emily bit her lip to keep from letting her emotions take charge. Of late it seemed to take very little to bring on tears. “Oh, Millie sent a can of peaches. Would you like some?”

Her mother shook her head. “I’m not hungry, Em. I’ll just lie here and let the medicine take the pain.” She closed her eyes. “I’m sure your father will be happy for the treat.”

“That’s what I figure. He’s no doubt already wondering where his noon meal is.” Emily headed for the main part of the house, leaving the bedroom door open. She took the sheet to the washtub, where water awaited. It took very little effort to dampen the material, and when she returned to the bedroom to place it on her mother’s weary body, Emily was rewarded with a smile.

“Ah, that feels so nice, Em. Thank you. You are a good girl.”

Mama never opened her eyes, so she couldn’t see the tears that sprang unbidden to Emily’s eyes. Emily dug her nails into her palms and hurried from the room. “I’ll let you know when I take Pa his lunch.”

Mama said nothing, but that wasn’t at all surprising. Talking seemed to drain the older woman of what little strength she had. By the time Emily had fried up some bacon and soaked a few hard biscuits in the leftover grease, her mother was sound asleep.

The afternoon sun bore down on Emily as she made her way to the river, where her father had set up his sluicing frame. He was faithfully panning in the water, humming a favorite hymn, while their old mule, Nellie, grazed on dry grass a few yards away, mindless of the cart she remained harnessed to.

Emily had to smile at the sight. Pa had rolled up the legs of his pants and stood barefoot in the shallow but rapidly moving river. “That looks like a good way to bear up under the heat.”

“Emmy, I’m mighty glad to see you.” Her father straightened and held out his pan. “I found some color. Look here.”

For a moment Emily allowed herself the tiniest spark of hope. “Truly?”

She came to where he stood and peered into the iron pan. There at the bottom were a few flecks of gold mingled with blue pebbles. It wasn’t nearly enough to get excited about. She sighed.

“Now, don’t go gettin’ all sad,” her father said. He came out

of the water to take a seat on the bank of the river. Once seated, he placed the pan between them. “I’ll add it to what I already have, and at this rate I’ll be able to head into town tomorrow or the next day and get a few supplies. Just remember, any color is proof that there’s a whole lot more somewhere upstream.”

“Oh, Pa. We’ve talked about all of this before. There was a gold strike here last year, so of course there’s gold, but you know as well as I do what everyone said about it.”

“I do know. I just don’t happen to agree.”

Emily handed him his lunch and sat down beside him. “It’s played out around here, and what’s left will take too much energy and money to retrieve. We don’t have a whole lot of either commodity.”

He laughed and pulled apart one of the biscuits. Bending a piece of the thick bacon in two, he sandwiched it between the biscuit halves. “I got plenty of energy left, and I’ll show ’em all. I ain’t giving up.”

Emily had heard this speech on many occasions. He’d never quit looking for that next strike—that big find. Henry Carver was absolutely convinced that God himself had ordained it. And God knew better than anyone that her father had looked for just such a treasure in every nook and cranny in the western United States.

“Oh, I just about forgot.” Emily withdrew the can of peaches. “Millie sent this as a gift.”

Her father took the can and smiled. “Good ol’ Millie. I’ll get this open right now and we can share it.” He unsheathed a knife he kept on his belt. “Yes, sirree, nothin’ quite as good as peaches.”

In no time at all he had the can open and offered Emily a small peach half at the end of his knife. She took the slimy piece and popped it into her mouth. The sweetness made her smile.

Her father had always had a sweet tooth, and this would no doubt offer some satisfaction. Of course, it didn't take much to give Henry Carver satisfaction. Emily had never known her father to be all that unhappy.

Now, Ma on the other hand . . .

As if her father could read her thoughts, he asked, "How's your mama doin'?"

"She's fine now. I picked up her laudanum at Millie's."

"Oh, that's good. She'll rest better now." Her father wiped peach juice from his graying beard. "She's quite a woman, your ma. Never complains. Ain't seen any woman who could come close to bein' as patient in adversity."

Their peaceful lunch was disrupted by the sound of rustling in the trees beyond the riverbank. Emily put her hand in her pocket to reassure herself that the pistol was still there, but her father stood and took up his rifle. Scouring the area for any sign of life, he waited. More than once they'd been surprised by a bear, so there was no need in taking any chances.

"I ain't a grizzly," a man's voice called out in amusement. A big man, bigger than any of the regulars in Yogo City, came out from behind a clump of pines.

Emily watched him, careful to keep her hat low so he couldn't see her face very well. In spite of the heat, she was grateful for her heavy coat. Her father lowered the rifle. "That's a good way for a man to get shot," he answered.

The man crossed the distance between them in what Emily thought was no more than ten steps. His long legs made strides that would have taken at least two and possibly three for most folks. She looked up, shielding her eyes by bending the brim of her hat down a little lower. The stranger had to be at least six and a half feet tall. Her own father stood at six feet, and this man was another head taller.

“Name’s Kirk Davies.”

The man looked down momentarily at Emily. She quickly lowered her head. There was something about him she didn’t trust—something that suggested trouble. Davies was certainly no more scruffy and dirty than the other men who lived in the area, but he had an air about him that almost frightened her.

“I’m Henry Carver. What can I do for you?”

“Well, the fact is, I’m here to do something for you. I understand you own the claim just up the hill and back of these trees.”

Emily glanced back up to find that Davies’ attention was completely fixed on her father. The scowl on Pa’s face told her he didn’t like the intrusion and arrogance of this man any more than she did.

“I reckon I do, but I hardly see how that’s any of your business.”

Davies’ jaw clenched and Emily could see his eyes narrow. He had beady eyes that reminded her of a rattlesnake. “I’m here to offer to buy you out. I’m employed by a man who wants to buy up as many of these claims as possible.”

“Well, you’re wastin’ your time with me. I ain’t lookin’ to sell.”

“Now, just a minute,” Davies countered. “You haven’t even heard what I’m set to offer.”

“Don’t much care what you’re offerin’. I don’t have any intention of sellin’.”

“Well, if you ain’t an ingrate.” Davies reached out faster than Emily or her father could react. He took hold of Henry’s upper arms, making it impossible for him to raise the rifle in defense.

Emily forgot about hiding her face and jumped to her feet to confront Davies. “Leave him alone.”

Davies looked at her a moment. Then his face seemed to light up in amusement. “Now, ain’t you a sight. You got eyes darker

than stout ale. In fact, you're kind of pretty. Be even better in the right clothes. Or out of them."

Emily stiffened, but it was her father who made the next move. He punched Davies square in the belly, loosing the big man's grip.

Davies fell back a few steps, and his eyes narrowed. "You ought not to have done that, mister. I can't abide a man who hits me."

"And I can't abide a man who lays hands on me and treats my daughter like a common strumpet," Carver replied, once again bringing up the rifle. "Now, get outta here before I forget I'm a good Christian."

Davies' scowl deepened. "You're gonna need more than God to protect you. I'll go for now, but I'll be back in a week for your answer."

"You already have my answer," Emily's father declared. "I said no. I'm not lookin' to sell."

Davies' expression changed to a cold, calculated smile. "You will be—only then my offer ain't gonna be half as generous."

He turned and headed back the way he'd come, leaving Emily and her father to watch. Despite the heat, Emily shivered. She could only hope he would forget about them, but unfortunately, she knew that wasn't likely.