



2013 Third Place

## Trusting Blue Eyes *by Jeanette Collins*

**They brought Emmett Randall home in the back of a wagon. Clarissa had stood with her Papa as the little caravan of riders, led by Emmett's older brother Gibson, stopped at the Sheriff's Office. When she saw the lifeless figure, wrapped in a coarse blanket, she had staggered**

and nearly fallen. Papa had caught her as talk whispered around her. Shot dead in a Santa Fe saloon. Shot. Dead. Then she collapsed, the world a blur.

Liquor in her mouth. Broken cries. Gibson looming up, his face a question. Burning remorse covering her. Papa had taken her home. Said nothing and took her home. She lay in her bed and would not rise. And time passed. Time always passed, but everything had changed.

She walked the Main Street without hope, bought food, blindly read the newspaper, faced the bald future. Then Gibson Randall had appeared at her side. Every day he was there, carrying her market basket, holding her elbow, attracting attention. What did he want? Why wouldn't he go away?

Now, wherever she went, he shadowed her. In church, as she struggled with her guilt and regret, he came to sit beside her then insisted on seeing her home, driving her in his buggy. It made gossip. People nodded and smiled their approval and it confused her. He began to arrive in the evenings, to sit in the parlor, looking at her. Papa accepted Gibson's bold attentions without comment and she feared somehow he had guessed her sins. Late at night, alone at last, she mourned and wept. Now she knew, now it was certain. She must act, but how?

Gibson came and talked. Silent, she listened and it was an odd comfort to hear his steady voice, deep in timbre. It stopped some worries but gave her new ones. Wasn't he a threat? When would he leave so she could be at ease? Sitting on the porch in the cool at day's end, he told her about his sprawling ranch, about his cattle, about his plans. His words wove about her as she watched the stars cluster above the horizon, heard the night bird's forlorn call and the thin wail of coyotes near the river, waiting for him to weary of her and go away.

And time passed.



Clarissa sat in a straight-backed chair under the dappled shade of the cottonwood tree, plagued by her anxious thoughts. The sloping yard glittered in the blazing sun, each grain of sand reflecting heat. Golden chamisa along the road glowed like round lanterns and smelled oily and rank. The pungent odor of cactus drifted on the breeze, a scent like crushed sage. She wore a brimmed straw hat and the smoked glasses Papa had bought for her, to break the midday glare of the sparkling high desert. She had been pleased and hugged him, his beard tickling her cheek. Her worry covered her like clinging vines. How could she shame him?

Emmett had worn no beard and she had loved seeing the manly line of his jaw, his yellow curls, his laughter, his jokes, his careless ways. The memory of his words tore her asunder. *Why do you want me*, she had asked. He kissed her and said why. Only the once, only the one time with him and now he was gone. The promises he hadn't made still hung in the air. It seemed very long ago and as if it had happened to someone else.

She gripped the strings of her reticule, which she now carried everywhere. It was her safety, her way out. It lay heavy in her lap as she pondered what method would be most effective. She could not afford a mistake. Should it be now?

A shape emerged from the dazzle of sunlight and wavered toward her, slowly becoming a tall man on horseback. Clarissa sat very still. Go on by, she thought. Just don't see me. But Gibson rode right up to her, the horse's hooves raising plumes of dust. He stepped down and

touched his broad hat, looking at her from bonnet to boots.

"Miss Clarissa."

She inclined her head and wished he would disappear.

"Mr. Randall. Papa has gone into town."

"Has he? You ought to be in the house. It's mighty hot out here for you."

"I'm fine. Papa will be home sometime. Later."

She lost interest and looked away, noticing a flight of doves rise from distant cedar trees. The horse shifted, the saddle girth creaking. The noon sun beat down.

"I reckon I can see him when he comes. Are you feeling well?"

"Mmmmm. Come back tomorrow."

He paused. Now he will go, she thought. But he stepped closer.

"My business won't wait that long...Clarissa." She turned back to him, to the insistent note in his voice, to the use of her name. She shuddered. What did he know? "I've come to speak to you."

She stared.

"It's more than a week now. Ten days since we buried Emmett, and I want to say..."

Clarissa scarcely heard him over the noise that crashed through her ears. Buried. Dead and buried. She tried to swallow. Her voice was ragged. "Go away."

"I can't."

Too quick for her to see, he grasped the reticule. She pulled, he pulled. The strings broke and slipped from her fingers as she rose from the chair and fought to get it back. He held it high.

"Can't have any more of this, Clarissa."

She frowned at him. He looked down from his arrogant height.

"What do you imagine you're about, sir? Give me that."

"No. Come on to the house."

She pushed him with both hands, as hard as she could. He did not budge.

"Get away from here. Get off this land!"

He took her arm and towed her along to the porch, her feet almost leaving the ground. Clarissa was indignant and shouted. "Stop...this...minute!"

He looked determined, which angered her further. "We need to talk."

"No, we don't! There is nothing to say."

He maneuvered her in the front door.

Delores hurried in and looked him over. "What is this, Señorita?"

He cut in. "Bring Miss Clarissa some cool water, Delores."

She looked uncertain but went.

Clarissa removed her straw hat and glasses and sat down regally on the settee. She reassured herself; he didn't know anything, he couldn't possibly. "When Papa comes home, he will not appreciate your barging in like this. And putting your hands on me!"

"We'll see about that when he gets here."

He took off his hat and his fair hair tumbled out. Not as blonde as Emmett, she thought. He's taller, bigger, stronger. He sat down without asking leave, folding himself into a chair. Delores brought a cup of water, her black eyes large. She hovered and he waved her off.

"Go on along, Delores. I'm speaking to your mistress."

Clarissa's temper flared. "Mr. Randall is leaving! *He's* the one going."

He looked decisively at Delores and she hastily retreated. Clarissa drank the water, since it was there, and set down the cup, ready to scald him with invective.

He got there first. "I'm twenty-seven years old come August third. The ranch is in top form, as I've said, and I have money in the bank. The house is finished. I have a woman to cook and keep it for me. I'm in good health. But I'm all on my own."

He put his hat on his knee and leaned forward. Clarissa held on to her wits.

"I know you and you know me. We never talked a lot. Like many a gal, you only saw Emmett.

But I watched you and I admired you. He wasn't worth your company, Clarissa. He was deceitful. You were too good for him."

She was shocked.

"Your own brother! How can you say that?"

"I saw what he was, it was clear to me. He fooled about everybody, but never me. Why do you think that man plugged him?"

She was seized with uncertainty.

"It was...a fight."

"It was a gundown. That fella came looking for Emmett. He ran off to Santa Fe, but it turned out that was the

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wrong direction and he was found.”

“That’s not true! Why would anyone..”

Gibson looked steadily at her. His eyes were an honest brown, his mouth was firm. He knew what he was saying.

“The man has a sister. And Emmett had told her a heap of lies.”

Ice crashed over her awareness and stabbed her. She gasped for breath. Bad enough before, but now! Gibson opened the reticule, took out the silver pistol and spun the chamber, the bullets falling into his palm. He put them in his pocket. Clarissa despaired. Her mind went in all directions, terror chasing her. Would he tell? But his manner was kind and his voice was tender.

“There’s no need for this, Clarissa. It would break your Papa’s heart to lose you. It would break mine. I’m here to say so.”

She groped her way back to the present.

“What?”

“I mean to offer for you. Right today.”

“Nooooo..”

“I know my mind, girl. I think I know yours. I wanted you before Emmett got to you, and I want you now. Marry me, Clarissa. I’ll be good to you, you won’t ever want for anything. I’ll see to it.”

She labored for control and assumed a haughty manner.

“I’m afraid I cannot consider it, Mr. Randall.”

“Call me Gibson.”

“Well, um, Gibson, thank you for your generous—”

“Don’t give me any of that nonsense. We’re short of time. We have to get going.”

Blood rushed to her head.

“How dare you...say these things?”

He smiled brilliantly, bewildering her.

“Oh, well. I would like to properly come calling and take months to do it, but...marry me and then I’ll court you. I would do so diligently. I can see you caring for me, eventually. I would try hard to make you happy and get you to like me. I’ll take all the time you need to do so. I won’t ever touch you without your consent or say a harsh word to you, I promise. And you’ll be taken care of.”

Her senses trembled, hot tears welled in her eyes. No, no. It would not do. She could not mislead him. She had to tell him, pledge him to secrecy and somehow get the pistol back before Papa or Delores.... A tear escaped and ran down her cheek. All was lost. Where could she turn?

He dragged his chair nearer. “Don’t be sad, pretty Clarissa. Take my hand.”

“I...it’s not possible. I’m very sorry, but...” she wiped her eyes and gathered courage, “I have to tell you, Gibson, the truth is—”

“You don’t have to tell me anything. I already know.”

She hid her face in her hands but he took them away, gently holding her wrists.

“Emmett was a fool. He didn’t know what a jewel he had in your

regard, in your affection. He was just... himself, wild and reckless, but he hurt good folks. That’s how he was and you’ll see that, when you can bear to look. It’s no shame to you, Clarissa, now or ever, and I’ll be proud to have you for my wife. The child is my blood kin and deserves a place. I will treasure the baby and cherish you. I swear it.”

Everything turned inside out, her heart thumped. He didn’t condemn her. Not to have to die, the infant saved, no disgrace, Papa satisfied. Everything alright. She looked into his face and saw his goodness and his clean ways. She saw the future open out. She could live and there was a way to go on—not as she had thought, not as she had fancied—but a way. She felt an immense relief.

“Oh, Gibson. Why would you take such a chance on me?”

He smiled again and she saw his warm thoughtfulness and his honor, things Emmett had never shown her. Things the brother had not had. He took her hands in his. “Because of your trusting blue eyes and your sweet nature. And here comes your Papa. Get ready, Clarissa. We’re about to start something.”

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**JEANETTE COLLINS** writes contemporary romance novels and has just completed book thirteen in a series set in a small ranching community near Santa Fe. She is a painter who has lived in New Mexico since 1995 and has been writing for the last eight years.

