



LUCETTE NEL

THE

Widow's Captive

AN HISTORICAL
CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

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Dedication

To my husband. Your encouragement and love has
made this journey easier. I love you.
To my awesome critique partners, I'm blessed to have
you.

What People are Saying

Loved this. It was a fun read. ~ Linda Yezak,
author of *The Cat Lady's Secret*

1

Clear Creek County, Colorado
December, 1882

Cold air bit his cheeks as snow pelted him. Jonah Hale pinched the bridge of his nose in an effort to stifle a sneeze. He had to be a special kind of fool to allow the women of church to persuade him to plod through the woods on his horse during a brutal storm.

Not persuade. Bully.

He wiped his face with the back of his glove-covered hand. Men had lost their way in weather not half as bad. Had he known the storm would turn this fierce, he'd have waited a day or two. If he didn't freeze to death, the miner, Don Hanson, might just put a bullet in him this time.

Feed the hungry. Help those in trouble.

Except for the occasional drink at Seth's saloon, that old loon Hanson didn't want anything to do with the residents of Hollow Creek. That's why he stayed in the remote cabin.

Granted, under different circumstances, Jonah would've saluted the women's concern over the miner, but it was difficult when heavy clouds and darkness loomed.

Shivering, he pulled the collar of his duster another notch higher and licked his quivering, parched lips. *Please Lord, let me reach Don's cabin before I freeze to*

death.

Freezing to death couldn't be as bad as what Mattie had suffered. Images of the building collapsing stabbed Jonah. Emotion clogged his throat. He rocked in the saddle and shook his head. "Easy, boy. Don't dump me now."

The stallion snorted and its ears flicked to and fro.

Patting the muscled neck, Jonah blew out his breath. It appeared in front of his mouth in white puffs. Urging the animal forward, he lifted the lantern high to study the dark surroundings. The light did little to penetrate the dense shadows and massive swirling snowflakes. Annoyance at the cold bubbled inside him. Although born and raised in Colorado, he'd never witnessed anything quite like this. He ought to be in the boardinghouse, his mouth watering over the venison stew his aunt served on Mondays.

No use complaining. Here he was, fighting aggressive winds and guiding a horse through knee-deep snow. His stomach rumbled, taunting him for refusing the sandwiches his aunt offered on his way out. *Just dandy, Jonah.*

Frost gnawed at the tip of his nose and the wind pinched his ears, and he pulled his scarf up to cover the lower part of his face. Reared in Clear Creek County, he knew the woods as well as the star pinned on his chest, but in this weather, nothing appeared familiar. The possibility that he was lost mocked him. It was a harsh likelihood to face, considering he could barely make out a foot ahead. He squinted and, standing up in the saddle, studied the intimidating shapes of pines. *Lord, I'd be obliged if You'd give me some kind of sign down here.*

The blinding snow slowed for mere moments,

enough to reveal a faint flickering in the distance.

"Hallelujah!" Jonah slapped the mount's side. "We'll be out of this storm in minutes."

The light disappeared—blackness cloaked the world ahead of him once again. But not before he directed his horse toward the cabin. All around, tall evergreens swayed to and fro. A branch snapped nearby. He rested his hand on the butt of his holstered Colt as the hair at the back of his neck rose. The wind carried the howls of wolves, perhaps the very pack that had attacked a local peddler two nights ago.

His horse's hind legs buckled and he fell hard onto his haunches. Jonah grabbed the saddle horn to keep himself from flying back. The stallion snorted and tossed its head.

"Come on, it's not much farther, boy." He dismounted. With the reins in one hand, he untied his saddlebags with the other and slung it over his shoulder. They trudged through the snow, leaving a track of foot and hoof prints in their wake.

A loud crack split the air. The stallion reared. Jonah fell back, dropping the lantern and missing a hoof by mere inches. Before he could grab the reins, the animal took off.

Jonah slapped the snow and pushed to his feet. The mount's shape disappeared as darkness swallowed it. Lifting the lantern, he didn't need to see it to know it was broken and no longer useful. He rounded his shoulders and, dipping his chin to his chest, resumed his journey toward the cabin marching like a wounded soldier.

Please let Don be sober.

The lean-to, warm from the fire in the cabin, welcomed him. Two paints lifted their heads at his

entrance, ears twitching. A mule continued to eat its dinner at leisure. Impressive and well-looked after animals. No wonder he saw a light. Someone had filled up the hay and poured fresh water for the animals. Had Don bought horses? Nah. He thought them ornery. Maybe he was sheltering travelers.

Jonah stroked one paint's side. How long would he have to stay cooped up with crazy Don?

Wrapping his arms around his chest against the vengeful wind, he hurried to the door and pounded on it. "It's me, Jonah Hale."

The wooden slab creaked open on leather hinges. No sooner had he set foot inside, when his boot caught and he went tumbling forward. His hands and knees connected with the cold floor. Before he could gather his wits, excruciating pain exploded in the back of his head and shot down his neck. All energy left his body. Stars flecked his vision and he crumpled to the floor.

Adeline Spencer's pulse raced and she clutched the skillet against her chest. Her knees buckled and a tremble slid down her spine. *Wonderful. Now what?*

The black duster didn't look familiar. Nor did the brown Stetson that had flopped to the ground moments before the intruder had. The man sprawled facedown didn't have shoulders quite as broad as her brother-in-law. There was a chance this man might be the owner of the cabin. If she'd cracked his skull, it would jeopardize their position.

No. Wait. He wouldn't have knocked if he was the owner. The only other plausible explanation dried her mouth. He worked for Ward Spencer. Adeline lowered

the skillet to her side and gripped her son's shoulder with her other hand. "I told you to bar the door."

"Sorry, Ma." Ethan folded his arms. Her admonishment had apparently faded his enthusiasm at tripping the intruder.

"Is he dead, Mama?" Lily whispered, huddled beneath blankets on the cot.

Adeline twisted to lean forward over her expanded abdomen. She jabbed the skillet's edge into the man's shoulder blade. He groaned. She rubbed her brow in an effort to squelch a fast-developing headache. "No."

But when he woke up, his headache might be enough to make him wish he was.

Dread gnawed at her limbs. She pushed wayward strands of her hair away from her face. The unexpected knock had caused all rational thinking to evaporate.

"Lily, bring me the rope."

Her daughter scrambled to a battered crate as fast as her five-year-old legs could carry her. She yanked a loop of rope from the inside and handed it to Adeline.

Ethan frowned.

With a galloping heart, Adeline slid her hand beneath her stomach and lowered to her knees. Muscles in her legs complained. "Ethan, help me roll him over."

Ethan jumped into action.

A thud filled the room as the back of the man's head knocked against the dirty wooden floor. His eyelids flickered and a grimace twisted his face.

Working fast, Adeline wrapped the rope around his wrists while Ethan hovered with the pan. She moved to his scuffed boots and secured his ankles.

Where Ward was stocky, this man was tall and

lean. Still, she wasn't ready to take a chance and underestimate the strength of his form. After his ankles were bound, she unbuckled the gun belt and pulled it from his hips. A holstered double-action revolver with cartridges added weight to the leather strap. She frowned at him. He was too heavily armed to be taken lightly. She slung the belt across the back of the ladder-back chair.

Lily had tripped over a loose board close to the hearth last night; it would make the perfect spot to hide his weapon. If only Adeline knew how to use a gun, it would make a better defense than the skillet.

"Are we putting him back outside?" Ethan's voice quivered. He stretched his spine, trying to look taller than his seven-year-old form allowed.

"Merciful heavens, no." Adeline massaged the dull ache in her lower back. The poor baby was probably so fed up with the cramped confines of her belly. She gulped. Even though she'd borne two children, she'd always had a skilled midwife present. And Ben. Her insides clenched and tears prickled her eyes. She'd never in a hundred years have imagined she'd face the possibility of birthing a child in an abandoned cabin, in the middle of the woods.

Ethan poked the man with his toe. "What will we do with him?"

"We need to move him closer to the fire." She calculated the space separating the intruder from the stove. The cabin was tiny, but in her condition, it might as well have been a hundred miles.

"Why?" Lily clung to Adeline's skirt, her young face scrunched up at her mother.

"It's warmer. I don't want him to catch a cold." She sat back on her haunches and breathed into her

hands.

Ethan stood unmoving. "What if he's one of the bad guys?"

From the gun belt and the way he'd sneaked around the corner of the building, she was convinced there was no *what if* involved. Still, she couldn't let him freeze to death. She furrowed her brow. "We still need to take care of him."

"Ma—"

"Not another word, Ethan." She offered Lily a reassuring smile. "The Good Lord expects us to love both our neighbor *and* our enemy." She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. Ward's endless pursuit haunted her. Leaving the invader there tempted her more than she'd care to admit. She gripped his thick duster and tugged. Nothing. Not even an inch. How much did he weigh?

Ethan had no better luck. "It's useless, Ma. He's too heavy." Ethan braced his hands on his knees.

Adeline stretched and chewed the inside of her cheek. Her son was right. "Let's roll him over to the fire." That might work.

As if giving an unconscious objection, a groan vibrated from the man's chest.

Royal Law or no, Adeline curled a fresh grip on that frying pan.

He'd move one way or another.

2

Relentless hammering agony radiated from a spot at the back of Jonah's head, claiming every inch of his skull as it pummeled hard and deep. His shoulder blades jabbed against a solid, cold surface. He opened his eyes. It took a moment for the room to stop tilting and for his eyes to adjust to the interior of the cabin. Light flickered against the walls. Shadows cloaked the corners.

Nausea washed over him. He twisted his head, winced when the pain intensified, and squeezed his eyes shut when black dots marred his vision.

Soft footsteps and creaking leather registered. Not Don. A bad fall several winters ago forced the miner to walk with a definite limp. Jonah cracked an eye open again. In his peripheral vision, a black woolen skirt appeared. He started to touch his head, but both hands came together. *Drat*. His wrists were bound. He pulled against the rope, rotated his wrists, but it was useless. The rope was secure. Whoever tied him was meticulous in the deed. His assailant still seemed oblivious to his conscious state, giving him time to further assess his situation. He wiggled his feet. Ankles bound as well. His gut dipped as he patted his waist. Gun belt missing.

"Mama." A singsong voice of a little girl interrupted his observation.

Mama? Impossible. Hanson had no family. The idea

that he'd married was absurd.

"Mama, he moved," The little girl said again.

Fabric swished back and forth and Jonah envisioned the mother hurrying toward him. Where was Don?

Something poked him against the collarbone.

"Ethan, stop doing that." A sigh. "Lily please get away from him."

The calm and cultured voice didn't fit the face Jonah had conjured in his mind. He'd half expected the woman to bark orders like an army sergeant. Unease coiled in his gut. Maybe if he stayed still he could fool the woman into believing he was still unconscious. He doubted she'd be able to call his bluff. He might just convince her that her daughter was imagining things. At least, until he could figure out what to do with bound wrists and ankles. Better yet, where his gun might be.

Another jab. *Drat*. His eyebrows twitched.

"Ethan Spencer, stop that this instant." Cool fingertips probed against the pulse point at his neck.

Blood rushed to the spot. Before he could stop himself, he swallowed.

"You can stop pretending, mister." The woman wasn't fooled.

He groaned and opened his eyes. He lifted his head and made as if to sit up but stopped when pain pierced his skull. *What in blazes happened?* His surroundings whirled.

"Ethan put the skillet down." The woman's voice sounded at his side, and he snapped his head around faster than he should've. Rocks tumbled around in his skull and he winced.

Donned in black, the woman knelt and cleared her

throat. Her eyes possessed a remarkable brown tint. Strands of hair the color of chocolate cake framed her oval face. The rest of her hair was secured in a tight bun atop her head. She was pretty.

He fought the urge to slap himself. *Pretty?* Yep. The frost had gotten to him. At the sight of her protruding belly, his jaw slackened.

Beside her, a skinny boy gripped a skillet, holding it in front of him as if he was wielding Excalibur itself. *Ah.* Jonah would bet his last penny that was the thing responsible for his head threatening to explode.

"You have two minutes to tell me who you are and why you're here." The woman wrapped an arm around the little girl. The child pressed her face into the woman's shoulder and peeked at him.

"My name's Jonah Hale, ma'am." He shifted on the hard floor. Coldness seeped through the layers of his clothes. "I'm the sheriff of Hollow Creek." The fire beckoned him, almost as much as the aroma of stew churned his stomach. Retching in front of the woman and children was not an option.

"You don't look like a sheriff." The boy straightened beside his mother, his weapon still at the ready. Another knock against Jonah's skull might fracture it.

"And what do you expect a sheriff to look like?" He dodged a blow that never came. He really shouldn't provoke the kid.

Silence.

"You're dangerous with that thing." Jonah forced a smile.

Ethan pressed his lips together.

Fine. Jonah wouldn't smooth-talk his way out of his constraints. He shifted again on the floor.

"I knocked you against the head." The lines on the woman's face smoothed, making her look younger. In fact, she didn't look a day older than twenty. "I'm sorry if you have a headache." Neither did she look repentant.

Unfortunately, *sorry* wouldn't dull the merciless hammering. Who knew a conk on the head could cause this much agony?

"You need to get closer to the fire. Heat from the hearth would warm your bones." She stood with a groan and arched her back.

Where was her husband? Surely he'd strut through the door along with Don any moment. Maybe Jonah would have better luck convincing him of the absurdity of this situation. *Wait. She was wearing black.* His throat constricted.

"Are you going to untie me?" He held out his arms.

She arched a brow and fisted her hands on her hips. "No." A look like that could bend any kid into obedience.

"Ethan please help me get him up." She gripped and tugged at Jonah's arm.

Shifting to the side, he tried to push himself up, but it was more difficult with bound wrists and ankles than he'd thought. The woman released his arm and grasped his waist while the boy caught his other side. Tiny icy fingertips burrowed into his skin. Jonah gritted his teeth.

The boulders smashed against each other in his head again. He staggered sideways and the rope around his ankles tripped him up. The woman tightened her grip around him, and wedged herself against his chest, keeping him from falling. Her gasp

reached his ears only moments before he regained his balance.

Did he smell vanilla? He fought the urge to lean forward for a deeper whiff.

Dark lashes shielded her eyes from his. "Do you think you can make it to the chair?"

"Maybe you can afford to untie my feet?" He glanced at the piece of furniture, then at his feet.

She ignored his question and tugged at him.

Guess not. Two shuffles and then he went stumbling to his knees. "Please? I promise I won't try anything."

She squared her jaw. "I can always leave you here."

She's stubborn. Jonah exhaled. With a curt nod he managed to stand up again. At this rate, Christmas would come before they reached the chair. The floor swelled and dipped, and he squeezed his eyes for a second. He exhaled as he finally crumpled on to the furniture.

"Are you comfortable?"

His tiny nod had pain spearing his skull again. She confused him. She didn't trust him, but she came close enough for him to have easily looped his arms around her to restrain her. A sign of bravery or pure foolishness?

Water splashed into a tin mug. *Not water. Coffee?* He'd recognize the aroma anywhere. The cup, as battered as the coffee pot she poured from, scraped against the table as the woman slid it in front of him.

"Where's Don?" He struggled with the rope again.

"Who's Don?"

"Don Hanson. This is *his* cabin."

She stiffened and rubbed her forehead. She looked

around the tiny shelter, gnawing her bottom lip. Lifting her chin, she rested her hand on her belly. "When we arrived, the cabin was empty."

"Really?" Jonah cocked his eyebrow. Don left his cabin only to fish at the creek fifty feet from here. In rare cases, he bought supplies in Hollow Creek and enjoyed a drink at the saloon.

"Yes." Her voice was as crisp as a November morning.

He narrowed his eyes. Criminals came in all shapes and sizes, and lies dripped off their tongues as easily as the snow was coming down outside. Even a pregnant woman with beautiful, walnut-colored eyes, and a skillet-wielding son. Could she have offered the old miner to take his cabin? She, who'd offered him a place next to the fire, and even poured him coffee?

He worked his jaw back and forth. His gaze flitted from her to the freckled faces of her two young children. The boy was solemn, desperately trying to look older than his age. But his eyes belied his brave stance. The shy little girl buried her face in her mother's skirt.

The woman gasped, and Jonah jumped.

"You think I did something to him?" Her voice thinned.

"Did you?"