

# Holding the Fort

**REGINA JENNINGS**

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# Chapter One

JUNE 1885  
WICHITA, KANSAS

**T**he fumes of the gaslights at the foot of the stage protected Louisa Bell from the more noxious odors of her audience. On hot nights like tonight, the scent of unwashed bodies in the Cat-Eye Saloon could be overwhelming. Braving a deep breath, Louisa delicately placed her hand against her beribboned polonaise and crescendoed her way into the next stanza. She lifted her head and sang to the rafters so she didn't have to meet the eyes of her overly interested, overly intoxicated, overly male audience. Their approval meant she had a place to live and food to eat. And while she knew that performing on stage carried certain undesirable associations, it was the only path open to her.

She held the final note while Charlie resolved the chord on the piano. The applause exploded immediately. Whistles and hoots filled the air.

"That was dandy, Lovely Lola." Slappy flopped his loose hands together in appreciation.

"Lovely Lola, will you marry me?" She didn't know his name, but the cowboy was there every summer when the cattle made it up the trail.

"You're an angel!" Rawbone cried.

Louisa might not be the youngest, most coquettish performer at the saloon, but the purity and emotion of her

voice couldn't be denied. She curtsied elegantly, holding her flounced skirt to the side. Cimarron Ted held up a glass to toast her. She returned his smile as she prepared for her last song of the night. Charlie started the intro on the piano, and Louisa mentally recited her pre-song mantra.

*I am Lovely Lola Bell. They will be enchanted by my performance and will love my show.*

She caught movement out of the corner of her eye. It was Tim-Bob, the owner of the Cat-Eye Saloon. With his hand wrapped firmly around Persephone's white, shapely arm, he was marching through the stage curtains and onto the stage, right in the middle of Louisa's nightly performance.

"Hey, Charlie," Tim-Bob called, "cut off that music. I have an announcement to make."

The pianist wasted no time in stopping and taking a swig from his bottle. The crowd wasn't as quick to simmer down.

"Let Lovely Lola sing!" a man hollered.

"It's Saturday night! Can't have Saturday night without Lovely Lola."

Whatever was going on, Louisa wished it didn't have to happen in front of a rowdy mob. Persephone showed promise as a performer on Tuesday nights—that was Louisa's night off—but she showed more promise as Tim-Bob's next ladylove. So why was she here now?

Persephone's blond hair—Tim-Bob always preferred blondes—had been arranged to swoop dramatically over one eye. That same eye was kept carefully trained on the scarred stage floor, but there was a self-satisfied twist on her tinted lips. Louisa's stomach twisted, too, and it had nothing to do with stage fright.

Tim-Bob held up the hand that wasn't busy touching Persephone. "If y'all would settle down and listen. It's not often that an establishment is graced with two such talents as Lola Bell and Persephone, but when it is, then it owes its customers the opportunity to appreciate both."

"It's Saturday. I came to town to hear Lovely Lola!"

Through the smoke-filled room, Louisa could make out Cimarron Ted shaking a fist. Tim-Bob shaded his eyes, then dropped his hand as he recognized the complainer.

"I understand we have some old admirers of Miss Lola's, and that's just dandy, but they'll soon grow to appreciate the charms of a new face . . . a younger face. I'm thinking of you, my friends, knowing how you'll thank me after you hear Persephone perform the finale tonight."

Persephone fluttered her eyelashes and smiled up at Tim-Bob. He gazed deeply into her eyes as Charlie jumped into action and played the opening notes to the song.

Louisa's song.

The audience, those traitors, barely noticed as Louisa backed away into the shadows. No one interrupted Persephone's slightly flat opening to call for Louisa's return. No one tried to stop Louisa from disappearing into the poorly lit hallway. No one except Tim-Bob.

"Lola, we need to talk." He stood next to a wall sconce. The gaslight flicked distorted shadows over his face. "Persephone's talent deserves a bigger audience, and she's young. With more experience, there's no limit to how she could develop."

Louisa pulled her cascading hair over her shoulder. Tim-Bob had said that about her at one time, but then she'd refused his advances. She'd thought her voice was enough to keep her job. Had he been looking for her re-

placement all this time?

“Is she taking every Saturday performance, then?” Louisa relied on her stage skills to keep her voice level—cheerful, even. “I suppose I could use the break from the daily—”

“Lola, just stop. It’s best just to say this and get it over with. The Cat-Eye doesn’t need two singers. Now, that doesn’t mean I’m just going to dump you out on the street. You can keep your room while you find another job, or at least for a few weeks. I was a friend of your mother’s, after all.”

Her mother hadn’t had any friends. Not in the end.

“Thank you,” Louisa mumbled, and her feet moved toward her room at the end of the dark hallway. She ignored his weak excuses as they faded behind her.

This couldn’t be happening. What would she do? Where could she go? She fumbled blindly with her door, and when her eyes focused again, she was sitting at her vanity stand. Reaching for a cool rag, she began wiping the rouge off her cheeks.

“Come in,” she answered to the knock at her door. Not because she wanted company, but because she was too stunned to refuse it.

Cimarron Ted entered, scratching at a spot of mud dried to his white beard. The metal on his gun belt jangled as he shifted his wiry frame to avoid bumping up against a satin dress hanging from the clothing rack. “I had some news for ya, but I don’t figure you want to hear it right now.”

Louisa’s lips settled into a rare frown. “Tim-Bob is kicking me out. I don’t know where I’m going to go.”

Through the thin walls, she could hear the applause as Persephone sang the last of her number. The men were

fickle. As long as they had some pretty entertainment to go along with their drink, it wouldn't matter much who it was. The important thing was that Louisa find another place to work. Something to keep her head above water so she didn't sink to desperate measures.

The lace on her wide neckline chaffed against her collarbone. Snapping out of her daze, she hopped up. "Here, help me out of this gown. I need to make plans." She turned her back toward the old mule driver as she considered her options.

Where else could she sing? She knew every house of entertainment in Wichita, and none were looking to hire. Finding a job outside of the smoky rooms on Douglas Avenue seemed unlikely, too. Even if her singing career hadn't tainted her, her mother's reputation had forever doomed her.

"My old fingers aren't as nimble as they used to be," Ted said. And he wasn't lying. The gown loosened slowly.

Louisa held the ribbons of the decorative front lacing in her hands, her feet tapping through her options. She'd always thought about giving voice lessons, but no respectable family in Wichita would welcome Lovely Lola into their home. If she had enough money for train fare, could she find work in another city?

"There you go," Cimarron Ted said. "If it weren't for you being like a daughter to me . . ."

Louisa stepped out of her gown. From the red tint spreading up Ted's neck, she should've asked him to wait outside before stripping down to her corset cover and petticoats, but for the company Louisa kept, she was dressed as modestly as a bride.

She reached for her silk dressing gown. "I met my father, and he wasn't you." Although she'd much rather

have a crusty mule skinner as a father than the wastrel that sired her. Bradley's pa wasn't any better, either. Best that they just relied on each other, as they always had.

Thinking of her brother brought a terrible suspicion to her mind.

"Ted, you said you had news for me?" Her hands shook as she hid them in her fur-lined pockets.

"Well, I thought you should know that Bradley is in trouble again. From what I've heard, he's been thrown in the guardhouse."

Louisa clutched her hands into fists. There couldn't be a worse time for him to mess up. "What's he in trouble for?"

"Nothing for you to worry about. Just a little drinking, from what I hear. I doubt it amounts to much. Major Adams is known for having a stiff collar, and Bradley's known for tomfoolery. You got troubles of your own."

This was no time for Bradley's hijinks. As bad as her situation was, at least she'd been assured that her younger brother was out of the rain. How could she fix him when she didn't know what to do herself?

"I'll go see him." The decision was made even as she spoke. "I need a job, and maybe they're hiring at the fort. Besides, he needs to know that he'd best walk the straight and narrow, because I can't help him right now."

"Pardon me for saying it, ma'am, but you ain't going to Fort Reno. There's nothing there but a passel of ornery cavalymen and some irate Indians. There's no way you can help Bradley while he's under Major Adams. You've done all you can for the boy."

But even as he was talking, a plan was forming.

As long as she'd been in Wichita, Kansas, Louisa had never known the Cat-Eye Saloon to send performers on a

tour, but with that many men in one place, there had to be a need for diversions. She didn't know if the officers at Fort Reno would allow it, but it was worth a try. If only she could convince the U.S. Cavalry that their troopers would benefit from some wholesome entertainment. Or halfway wholesome entertainment, at least.

Even if she wasn't a respectable lady, Louisa had her standards. No drinking, no carousing, and no fraternizing with the customers—even if all the women in town assumed she did. Even if such behavior would make her as popular as Persephone.

"Where is Fort Reno, exactly?" Hangers skidded across the clothing rack as she examined her wardrobe. She might have to fight Tim-Bob for them, but she'd sewn most of these costumes herself. They were the only gowns she owned.

"It's in the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation, due south of here, but maybe you should write your brother and have a look-see over what to do next. I'd be sorrowed if you went all that way only to have to come back."

But she had to go somewhere. There was nothing in Wichita for her. She'd collect her last pay from Tim-Bob, pack her bags, and go see her only blood kin in the world.

It sounded like he might be in as much trouble as she was.

DARLINGTON AGENCY  
CHEYENNE AND ARAPAHO RESERVATION,  
INDIAN TERRITORY

A line of sweat ran down Major Daniel Adams's back as



the gate opened and a cow stumbled out of the chute. His horse's ears twitched, and the animal shifted beneath him as war whoops rose around the corral. Daniel stroked the neck of his horse to calm it. With no buffalo left to hunt, the Cheyenne men looked forward to some fun before the women came in to butcher the animals. Better the livestock catch their arrows than his troopers. The cow blinked at the wide-open prairie before it and then, to the delight of the braves, took off with hooves flying.

Mondays were distribution day at the agency. The women left their tepees at the river's edge to come to the agency for their weekly rations, and the men looked forward to finding sport with the poor cattle each family received—a rowdy practice that Daniel would rather not allow, but with the growing tension, it was best to let them have their fun. Another perceived attack on their way of life, and the Cheyenne might want to revive some of their other traditions—traditions that were better off forgotten. Daniel looked over his young troopers with a protective eye. Right now, he didn't have the numbers to defend the fort and agency both. He needed every man. Even men like Bradley Willis.

Daniel himself had written the report, and he had to admit it contained an impressive list of accomplishments for an intoxicated man—improper discharge of a firearm, insubordination to his superiors, and endangering the troopers and property of the U.S. Cavalry. Not that Private Willis wasn't capable of jumping his horse over the cannons, but he'd been standing in the saddle and shooting at the lanterns when he'd done it. And when Daniel had ordered an end to his merriment, it took four men to subdue him.

Or one bullet. Act like a fool in front of the wrong man,

and Private Willis's life wasn't worth a gopher hole. In fact, he might have a better future in a gopher hole if he didn't straighten up.

But since being released from the guardhouse, Private Willis had been on his best behavior. Currently he was manning the door of the agency's brick commissary store. Using rudimentary sign language, he motioned an Arapaho woman back to her place in the line, even though her Cheyenne sisters were bunching together, refusing her entry.

Daniel urged his horse away from the stock pen and toward the dispute. Private Willis paused in his communication with the women at Daniel's approach and saluted.

"Sir, I want to thank you for returning me to duty. That guardhouse is no place to rot on a day like this." The young man's eyes were level and quick. While others seemed to be wilting in the heat, he looked as cool as the springhouse.

The U.S. Army needed men like Bradley Willis. Men who were brave, fearless, and—to be honest—just a little reckless. Sometimes Daniel envied his boldness. A widower with two daughters couldn't take the risks that Willis took, but that didn't mean Daniel wasn't brave. And just because, years ago, he'd had to learn how to braid hair and play dolls didn't make him less of a man, either.

"You'd still be there, were we not shorthanded," Daniel said.

"I appreciate you giving me another chance, sir."

"Don't mess up again. Your antics put your fellow troopers in danger."

Willis's eyebrow rose a fraction of an inch. That movement was a challenge, and Daniel didn't walk away

from those.

Speaking with a patience he didn't really possess, Daniel said, "Those lanterns exploded when you shot them. Someone could've been hit by flying glass."

"I reckon," Willis allowed.

"Or a stray bullet could've killed someone, had you missed."

Willis squirmed. "No, sir. That's not likely."

Daniel's hand tightened on the reins. "Are you contradicting me, Private?"

Willis seemed to realize his mistake. "No, sir. Upon reflection, I allow it is possible that under the influence of strong drink, because of the extreme angle I had from standing in the saddle, and on account of the amazing speed my horse was traveling, that I could have missed my shot."

Evidently the guardhouse hadn't taught him enough. "You have sentry duty for the second watch every night this week as further punishment," Daniel said. "I'll notify whoever is on watch with you that you are not to leave their sight."

That took some of the sass out of him. "Yes, sir," he replied.

"And you are not allowed in a saddle on the campgrounds. When you reach the boundaries of the post, you will dismount and walk your horse to the stable unless drilling with your company."

Judging from Willis's grimace, that was the punishment that hurt. At least it was the one that would have bothered Daniel the most.

"Yes, sir," Willis finally said.

"You have many talents, Private. Keep your nose clean, and you might—"

“Major Adams!” Sergeant O’Hare appeared from nowhere, holding out his field glasses in shaking hands. “Over there, past the corral.”

Daniel didn’t need O’Hare’s panic to understand the urgency. Leaving Willis behind, he took the glasses, spurred his horse, and galloped to the edge of the settlement, narrowly missing the latest bovine victim.

The calls reaching him were not the war cries of the braves or hurrahs of his troopers. These voices were higher, feminine.

“Pa! Pa!” The strong voice of Daniel’s eldest daughter carried across the prairie. “Tell Daisy to give it to me!”

He jerked the field glasses to his face with enough force to blacken his eyes. The two girls streaked toward him, their horses leaping over piles of cattle bones and avoiding the mangy dogs that scattered as they approached town. In front was the youngest, Daisy, who’d been playing Indian again. Her long braids whipped in the wind, the hawk feathers she’d woven in barely hanging on. Her feet were covered in high-lacing moccasins.

Caroline chased hot on Daisy’s heels. Even though the sixteen-year-old girl resembled a full-grown woman, she was far from emulating one in maturity. Arms pumping on the reins, heels digging into her horse, skirts flying, and hair a mess, Caroline was easily the most interesting thing the troopers had seen in months. And it wasn’t just the troopers who were stunned. Even the hunters had paused in their pursuit to watch.

This was just the sort of incident that had his mother-in-law insisting the girls come to Galveston to live with her.

Daniel recognized the familiar tension that often preceded a battle. He tossed the field glasses to Sergeant

O'Hare, who was trying to disappear and leave him to handle his family alone.

He reached Daisy first. Gasping for breath, she looked over her shoulder. "Caroline is trying to take it away, but it's for me, too."

He would not raise his voice at his own daughters in public, but a raised voice was imminent. "We will discuss this in the agency office. Go."

But then Caroline darted between them. "Give me the letter," she commanded. Daisy attempted an escape, and Caroline caught her by a braid, nearly pulling her from the saddle.

"Ow, ow, ow!" Daisy cried. But her outstretched hand did not relinquish the prize.

It took a pointed glare from Daniel to snap his men's attention back to their distribution.

"Inside Agent Dyer's office! Now!" he ordered his daughters.

Still swinging at each other and bickering, the girls rode down the dusty street of Darlington and dismounted at the office. Finding the building empty, Daniel shut the door with a mighty crash.

"Do you have any idea what a spectacle you've created?"

But far from cowering, the girls continued to argue. "She took the letter Grandmother sent," Caroline said. "She won't let me read it."

Daisy's eyes darted from her father to the stove. Daniel's life often depended on predicting his opponent's next move. He had Daisy's arm in a tight grip before she got two steps closer to her goal.

"You will not burn that letter," he commanded.

"It's made out to me, too," Caroline said. "She has no

right to destroy it.”

“It’s a stupid letter,” Daisy hollered. Her face was streaked with sweat and tears. “You don’t need to read it.”

How could Daniel expect to keep his troopers under control when his own daughters were insubordinate? Without further comment, he snatched the letter from Daisy’s hand.

“Sit.” He pointed at the nicely trimmed sofa. Thank goodness Agent Dyer was busy and not around to witness this. Daisy stomped over and threw herself down. “You too, Caroline,” he said.

Caroline rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. He would never allow a trooper to have such a poor attitude or posture in his presence. So why couldn’t he figure out how to teach his daughters?

For starters, he couldn’t use the same rules he used on cavalry-men. He couldn’t throw them in the guardhouse if they mis-behaved or assign them to a lonely task. Ever since their mother died, he’d been too lenient with them. Sure, he’d taught them how to ride and shoot like nobody’s business, but now they were growing up, and there were new problems to face. Problems that even a courageous man couldn’t handle. They needed a woman to direct them, but ladies weren’t readily available in Indian Territory.

The girls needed their mother. He needed her, too.

Instead, he got to deal with his mother-in-law. He unfolded the letter. Daisy was telling the truth. It had been addressed to her and Caroline. Not to him.

For all the faith that the U.S. Army put in him, his former mother-in-law had none. Then again, the death of her daughter, although not his fault, could have colored her opinion.

“I don’t want to live with her.” Daisy beat the soft heels of her moccasins against the wood floor. “It would be so boring.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Caroline said. “Living here is boring. There’s no one to talk to. No girls our age at the fort. The only people are a few old washwomen and the troopers. And Father acts like the troopers carry an infectious plague. I can’t speak to any of them.”

Darn right, she couldn’t. He quickly scanned the letter and found more of what he’d come to expect from Edna Crawford. She presented the girls with the option of a rose-colored future in Galveston with her and their grandfather, the banker. Beautiful gowns, a musical society, life in a genteel city with all the advantages a young lady needed to be a woman of substance. They’d have everything they desired.

Everything except their father.

Of course, Edna didn’t think he was doing an adequate job raising her granddaughters. His eyes flicked over Daisy’s un-conventional mishmash of calico and Arapaho. He took stock of Caroline’s dress, which had grown too short and too snug to be worn in a camp full of lonely men. Edna was right. He wasn’t adequate, but that didn’t mean he didn’t love his daughters. They were his chief delight out here on the prairie. They were all that kept his house—and his heart—from being empty. She couldn’t have them.

“Why did you take this from your sister?” he asked Daisy.

Her green eyes flashed. “It belongs in the fire.” She jumped from the sofa and threw her arms around his waist. “I don’t want to leave you, Pa.”

Daniel laid a hand on her head. Sweet, impulsive

Daisy. So like her mother. Then there was stubborn, hardheaded Caroline with her blazing red hair, who was just like him.

With a sigh, he handed the letter to Caroline. She had a right to read it, even though it broke his heart that she wanted to move away.

“No more fighting,” he said. “And you cannot leave the fort without me ever again. I know I’m not able to teach you everything, but I have taught you that, haven’t I?”

Caroline only glared at her little sister. He was about to reprimand her when he happened to look down and saw that Daisy had her tongue out.

He was fighting a losing battle, but he would never tire of looking for ways to win. As always, he fell back on his training. When in trouble, call in reinforcements. He’d considered bringing in a teacher for months now but didn’t want to ask Edna for a recommendation. If only he knew whom to call.