

## RIGHT ON TIME

by Angela Breidenbach

### Chapter 1

**May 1883**

**Louisville, Kentucky**

“If you get on that train, Timothy Higgenbottom, I’ll write to your father. There will be no further support as of the day you walk out this door!” His mother’s thunderous mood covered the sitting room as if a storm gathered, lightning hiding just behind the full skirt of her paisley silk tea gown.

In Timothy’s experience, not one soul bucked Lady Higgenbottom’s edicts whether in England or Kentucky. But what would it matter in a few months? “Mother, once I turn twenty-five there is no further support anyway, unless both my brothers die before me.” He sat next to her on the damask-covered divan and took her hand. “Neither one of us wishes to lose James or John, and I have no wish to be beholden to either.”

“An allowance can be sorted, once your father returns from England, until you marry wisely.” She set a stern countenance few dared to cross. Timothy, on the other hand, crossed her regularly without trying.

Not at the level of holdings that required his father to travel from England to America twice each year. Roots in one place seemed less a burden and more a lifestyle to Timothy. He didn’t want to leave his family behind constantly. “Regardless, it’s not my goal to teach spoiled children to ride ponies or pander to rich heiresses in hopes of a financial windfall.”

“One must have a reasonable income as the son of the Earl of Cumberland.” Her fan flickered like a hummingbird as further proof of her annoyance. “Not this animal doctor nonsense.”

She hid her true feelings well. Few ever saw a moment of weakness in her. He knew better. “Mother, I love you.” He didn’t want to cause this great woman any pain. But there had to be more to life than saddle-backing his father and brother. “I need to build a life, a home, and name of my own.”

“Oh pish, you always have a home here. As for your name, only prized for four centuries. Would you insult your forebears?” She pulled her hand away, closing her fan against it with a slap.

“Do you wish me to remain a poor bachelor living off charity forever? Is that what you want for me?”

Her shocked expression leaned toward dumbfounded. “Poor bachelor? You’d control your wife’s income and property as does every other man.” Seamlessly sliding into composure, she

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laid out her plan. “It’s my duty to find you the best match, and I’ve done that for you. The Thompson family have been invited to present their lovely daughter, Althea, to us next week.” She tapped his forearm with her folded fan. “Of course, you’ll change your mind when you meet her.”

“I met her last year at the debutante ball.” Memories of stilted conversation during the young lady’s debut flooded back. Unable to find common ground, they’d lapsed into silence in an awkward waltz. He shivered at the thought of years in the presence of a woman bored with him and he with her.

“Then you know she’s perfectly acceptable for our status.” She patted her hair. “Thea’s mother has already mentioned her daughter finds you quite handsome.”

He narrowed his eyes. “I’m not marrying for social status. I’m definitely not marrying a girl who is merely acceptable.” He didn’t want to be merely acceptable either.

“Everyone marries for social standing. Even poor—” To her credit, Mariana Higgenbottom bit her tongue. “You must understand there’s an expectation in our position. Your duty is to the continuance of your family name.”

“Mother, I haven’t met anyone’s expectations up to this moment.” Timothy’s voice held reality rather than bitterness. He enjoyed helping mares foal, training them to race, and tending injured stock. He could do without all the human drama—and pretense. “A wealthy wife is not going to solve that dilemma for us.”

A little twitch fluttered in the corner of her left eye known only to the most attuned. Timothy caught the significance. Hurricane Mariana was about to unleash a torrent unless he soothed her first. “I expect you’ll be a dutiful and courteous host to Miss Thompson and her parents.”

“I’ll be a dutiful and courteous host.” He reflected her words back to her.

“I only want the best for you, Timothy. Love has nothing to do with a good match.”

“Do you really believe that, Mother?”

“At some point, you’re going to have to realize society has rules, and that is precisely why it has worked for thousands of years. Land and beasts are our support and sustenance, not our friends. Your duty is to your family and to live within—”

“Yes, ma’am, I understand rules and duty.” He’d reached the end of his patience with that long list of ridiculous rules. Who did they benefit? What was the point? Marrying a high society debutante brought respect and riches for both families through status or finances or both. The same way his mother provided an influx into the Higgenbottom coffers, and his grandmother before her. But he would never say so.

“Good, then it’s settled. Your father and I learned to love one another, as you and Thea will.” She truly did want the best for her children. Sadly, the limits of societal restrictions seemed more like the flat-earth versus round-earth philosophy he’d learned in boarding school. She took his silence as capitulation. “Right after the Kentucky Derby, we’ll enjoy a celebration supper and ball. Your father will draw up the dowry contract when he returns.”

“You’re already planning a party?” With two older brothers, and James already wed and managing the holdings in England, the family would have plenty of money and status. John would run Cumberland Meadows when it came time. As the spare’s spare, and everyone knew it, Timothy had no options except to work under his father and brothers as he’d been doing the last several years. He’d never be his own man unless he left to discover who that man could become. He needed to explore the round earth. “English Fancy is still a hair off last year’s winning time.” Their first American-born filly from an English-born stud showed great promise. But could she win the Kentucky Derby?

“Both you and your father have worked too hard to fail. I feel it in my bones. And then you’ll have every debutante from here to Britain wanting you to sign their dance cards.” She tapped her fingers on his wrist. “But trust your mother. Althea Thompson is the most suitable match.” With that, Lady Mariana Higgenbottom, Countess of Cumberland, swirled her cloudy skirts to change for dinner.

Timothy picked up the ticket the butler had left on the silver tray. The thin piece of paper that had set his mother off. He’d be on that train the day after the derby, regardless of how suitable Miss Thompson or how penniless he’d be on reaching Montana.

He jogged up the stairs to stash the ticket with the letter of invitation from Mister Robert Johnston at the JBarF Ranch near Anaconda, Montana. Through their exchange of letters over the last few months, it was agreed that Timothy would take on the position of ranch foreman and future husband to Miss Tara Johnston. He was, in effect, a mail-order husband. He hadn’t mentioned his title. Only that he’d been well-educated in animal husbandry and veterinary medicine.

His newly intended bride owned half the thousand-acre ranch. If their marriage worked out, Timothy would own the other half one year later. Together, they’d share the ranch. Working toward a common goal. Timothy would be on his way to establishing a future for their children without titles defining them. No more spare heir ideology, or the sense of being useless unless someone died.

To the Higgenbottoms, land meant prestige and wealth. But to him, it meant independence and freedom here in America. If he and Miss Johnston were agreeable to one another once they met, they’d marry. If not, he’d find another way to become a man of his own means with a future only he controlled.

### **JBarF Ranch near Anaconda, Montana**

“That’s the last of the fencing supplies, Pa.” Tara Johnston wiped the back of her wrist across her forehead, leaving a streak from dirty leather gloves. Then she plunked her fists on her hips. “We still got the back to replace and half the side down the O’Connells’ before we can let the herd graze this acreage again.”

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“No reason to worry.” He leaned into the long wagon. Grasping the end of the fence roll, he said, “Look at the tall, sweet grass they’ll be gettin’ since it had time to grow. Sweetest grass in the country.” He dropped the end of the roll then stretched his back. “They’ll be fat enough to drive to Helena’s livestock auction this year and lose very little poundage. They’ll gain it back on the grain waitin’ on the train.”

“You ain’t a bit worried?” Hopping into the wagon, she scooted around to push the last of the load forward. “The O’Connells are always worth watchin’. That fence didn’t cut itself, now did it? We’re lucky no calves got caught up in it.”

“I placed an order for more supplies that should be comin’ in tomorrow,” he drawled out. “Should be a new foreman on that train too.”

“How’d you find a man that wants to work horses and cows instead of silver and gold?”

Her father quickly looked away and shrugged as he bent to his work. “I placed an ad and he answered.”

“Uh huh.” Tara pursed her lips. Pa had something up his sleeve. He didn’t have a habit of avoiding her eyes. They had to rely on each other since her brothers died, and he couldn’t afford to be soft on her anymore. She’d been working as hard driving cattle, harvesting hay, and building their horse stock as any man.

He kept his attention on his work. “Ain’t easy to find one around these parts.”

“Till he hears about the Anaconda. I’m bettin’ he’ll be stayin’ long enough to jump in one of those shafts and we’ll never hear from him again. Ain’t nobody gonna pass up the money Marcus Daly is payin’ to work in that mining operation.” Two more ranch hands quit last week, leaving them in this fix.

She pushed one end of the barbed wire roll toward the end of the wagon and heaved with all her might as her father pulled. A tine tangled in her skirt and cuff, yanking her with the bale onto the ground. She landed flat out on her side with the wind knocked out of her, skirt torn and twisted around her knees, staring at the barbs that nearly skewered her. Her hat had landed three feet away. She let out a groan and flopped onto her back, staring up at spotty clouds.

“Tara!” Her father raced to help. “Where you hurt?” He lifted her to her feet.

A moment later she could breathe again. But she’d feel that one for a bit. “Not hurt, Pa.” Tossing aside her gloves, she hid the bleeding scrape with her hand. She looked up into his concerned eyes. “Just a scratch.”

Tara was all he had left of his wife and three children. He and Cookie, an old chuck wagon cowhand, watched her like the last chick after a fox destroyed the henhouse. “Sorry. I shoulda paid better attention. That’s what drug-out tired will get you—plus a sore elbow.”

“You sure?”

“Yep. Coulda been a lot worse if it weren’t for all the grass.” She shrugged it off. “Landed on nice, fluffy deer bedding.” She quietly dragged in another breath while pressing her arm against her ribs. She needed air in more than the literal sense.

Once he let her be, Tara dabbed the hem of her ankle-length riding skirt against the mouth of her canteen. Then cooled the scrape and cleaned it up as he finished unloading. That would sting a few days.

“Need some help with that?”

“No, I got it, thanks.” Not the first run-in with a scrape, and not likely her last. She ripped off the torn sleeve, fashioning a makeshift bandage around her elbow to keep the sun and bugs off tender skin while they worked.

They couldn’t keep going at this rate. Her body screamed from lack of sleep and aching muscles. Another hand would be a godsend. Even if the new man only helped get the downed section rebuilt, her pa was right to bring on a new foreman. Between fencing, cattle, the hayfields, and horses, the work never ended. They could use eight men. But so could most of the ranches for miles around. As it was, they all combined their crews for cattle drives to markets.

“Be prayin’ for no crashes, an on-time arrival, and cowboys that want to be cowboys.”

Swiping her hat off the ground, she swatted the dirt off her clothes. “Pa, I’m not sure the Lord can deliver on that.” She dropped her hat back on her head. “He seems to be focusing on other things lately, if’n you hadn’t noticed.”

“Don’t lose faith, Mouse. God has a way ’bout Him. He likes to sneak in a surprise when you least expect it.”

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