
THE
MISUNDERSTANDING

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Chapter 1

LONDON

March 1882

“Philippa Regina Stockwell, get your ear away from that door this instant!”

Philippa stomped her foot and growled out, “I will not! Go away you old hag.”

“Call me what you will, but if your father finds you eavesdropping on his private conversation he will take a switch to you, no matter your age.”

Philippa turned to her father’s housekeeper, the woman who had been a mother to her because Philippa’s real mother had died in childbirth. Philippa felt a twinge of regret for speaking so harshly to the woman. But it quickly disappeared. Her father was talking about her, about marrying her off to an old man. What was going on behind that door was her business, no matter what anyone said. She didn’t need to be reminded that she was three and twenty

and on the shelf. It had hit her square in the face when her rich, but untitled, father had welcomed Jonathan Porter, sixty-five years and at least fifteen stone of him, into the house and said, "Let's plan this wedding, shall we?"

They'd walked by Philippa without saying a word, and she'd stared after them, her heart dropping to the floor and her mind whirling. Surely they hadn't been serious. But while she'd been listening at the door she'd heard the word wedding at least twice, and the word sterling. Was her father being offered money for her? A dowry was one thing, but accepting money to get her off his hands? Was that what he was doing?

The thought sickened her. Her father hadn't cared if she'd been married before. He'd turned down two offers for her hand because they "didn't fit the bill," according to him. Not that Philippa had given two figs about those rejections. Both of those men had made her skin crawl. The memory of Howard Kyle made her want to vomit. She'd begged her father to reject him, and she'd been thrilled when he'd done as she wanted. But now here he was with a man as old as he was, talking about a wedding. Without her being involved in it.

Philippa turned toward Mrs. Judge, who stood near the hallway opening that led to the downstairs. The matron had her hands on her hips, and a huge scowl on her face.

"He's going to marry me to that—that—" Philippa stammered, and tears filled her eyes. "That old cow."

"You may have grown up in London and gone to finishing school, but your father is a farmer. You should know the difference between a cow and a bull, child." Mrs. Judge crossed the room, her chatelaine making noise as she moved. "Come into the kitchen for a cuppa. Some good, sweet tea will settle your nerves."

“That’s your answer to everything,” Philippa said as the housekeeper put her arm around her shoulders and led her toward the stairs.

“And I’m always right, aren’t I?” She propelled Philippa in front of her when they were at the staircase. “Now, down you go.”

As much as she hated to admit it, Philippa knew Mrs. Judge was right. There was nothing she could do to change matters. If her father had made up his mind to marry her to Jonathan Porter that was exactly what he would do. Her father and Mr. Porter had been friends for years, but that didn’t mean Philippa should marry him. She remembered sitting at the table the other evening, just as the pudding had arrived.

“I’m not getting any younger, my dear,” her father had said, cryptically. “It’s time I make sure someone was around to care for you.”

Philippa had wanted to tell him he was going to leave her enough money that men would be beating down her door, instead she’d said, “Father, let’s not talk of such things.”

He’d grumbled, “No time like the present,” but he’d dropped the conversation and told her that he’d take care of it. To her eyes, marrying her to a man the same age as her father was not taking care of things. It was putting her from one identical boat to another.

Once she was downstairs, Mrs. Judge guided Philippa to the staff table. “Tea,” she ordered. “With lots of sugar.”

Even though she’d been told numerous times not to do so, Charity, the cook’s assistant, bobbed a curtsy in Philippa’s direction, and hurried to do her boss’s bidding.

“It’s not fair,” Philippa said.

“Life is never fair for women,” Mrs. Judge said. “We are the lesser of the two sexes and have to do as we’re told.”

“But you married for love.” Philippa turned to her long-time caregiver. “You told me many times how you knew the first moment you set eyes on Mr. Judge that you loved him. Why hasn’t that happened for me?”

“It still might,” Mrs. Judge said as she sat down next to Philippa. She took the younger woman’s hand in hers and gently squeezed. “Are you sure you heard right? After all, words don’t always sound the same when they’re coming through a door.”

“He said wedding as he was passing me by,” Phillips said as Charity set down two cups of tea.

“Join us, girl,” Mrs. Judge said. “You can’t do much until Mrs. Bunch gets back from the market with her daily haul.”

Charity hurried to do as she was bid. Philippa studied the cook’s assistant, who was about her age, and didn’t have the worries of being married to a man who made her want to lose the contents of her stomach.

“Now, think positive, my child,” Mrs. Judge said. “Don’t you have afternoon plans with your friends? Horseback riding in the park, right? You love to take Trainer out on a run. It will clear your head and make you see things better.”

“It won’t change the fact I’m going to have to marry...him.”

“Think of it this way,” Mrs. Judge said. “He is so old he won’t force his intentions on you—a great deal anyway.”

Philippa’s stomach did another roil. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You’ll just close your eyes and think of taking a ride in the park, and soon it will be all over,” Mrs. Judge said. “A man his age won’t visit often. Heaven knows Mr. Judge does not do it very much anymore.”

“Does it hurt?” Philippa blurted out. “Is it that unpleasant?”

“It hurts the first time,” Charity said, and then she

covered her mouth with her hand and said, "Sorry for speaking out of turn. I mean I heard it does. I wouldn't know, not being married and all."

"I should hope not," Mrs. Judge said. "But your information is correct, Charity. It is painful the first time, but not so bad that you would think it unbearable. If the gentleman is kind, as I'm sure Mr. Porter will be, you will be fine. Once you have a child inside you I am sure he will leave you be."

"Lands sake I hope so," Philippa said. "I wonder if I could fall in love before father sets the wedding. I am going to a party at the Palmer house tomorrow evening. Perhaps if I wore my dress low enough, some gentleman would be attracted. If I could get him to act on it before father makes the announcement, I might have a chance."

"Don't you go making naughty plans," Mrs. Judge said. "You will do as a dutiful daughter should and marry whomever your father decides is best."

"Of course," Philippa answered, even as her mind began to spin with ideas of how she could get out of her father's house. She had money of her own, not much, but she came into it on her twenty-first birthday. Her mother had left it to her. She often thought of her mother. She knew from the portrait that hung in the library that she resembled the woman who had died giving birth to her. Her father had been so grief-stricken that he hadn't looked at another woman. Ever.

Instead he'd hired a nanny, Mrs. Rosemont, to take care of Philippa, who had been named after her mother. Then he'd hired the Judges to take care of his house while he traveled the countryside and bought up farm after farm. Now he was a large landowner, and his cows provided milk for sale, his chickens provided eggs, and his cattle provided beef.

Philippa knew the two men who had offered for her had been interested more in her money than they were in her. As

her father's only child, she would inherit the lot when he died, of course if she was married it would all go to her husband. He had no partners, and the land, she knew from eavesdropping on conversations when his solicitor had been there, was worth a fortune.

That land had sent her to finishing school, had taught her how to be a lady and helped her to get an education. But she hated the thought that men looked at it more than they looked at her.

There was nothing wrong with her in the looks department. Her friends often complimented her on her long blonde hair, and she knew her small upturned nose helped her looks. She had the same large breasts that her German mother had possessed, and she was, as Mrs. Judge often said, stout of figure, but not so stout as to put men off.

"Most men like a woman with something to hold," Mrs. Judge had said once. Her husband, who had been standing nearby, had laughed, and as Philippa had turned to leave the room, she'd seen him, out of the corner of her eye, smack his wife on the bottom. Mrs. Judge had giggled. The sound was so unlike the sometimes stern woman that Philippa had thought about it for a long time after.

Now she hated the thought that no man would ever smack her on the bottom, and she'd never giggle.

"Go upstairs and take a rest," Mrs. Judge said. "Then Dawn will help you change into your riding habit, and you'll enjoy your afternoon outing. It will be a wonderful thing."

Philippa knew she was right, but that didn't mean she had accepted her fate. No matter her father's plans, she had to find a way to thwart them, no matter what it cost her.

"Oh my sweetie, I'm so sorry."

Philippa pulled on Trainer's reins to slow him down, then glanced over at Rebecca Coddle, one of her best friends. "Thank you, Rebecca." She patted Trainer on the neck, then looked behind them to where her other friend, Marie Greatworth, was talking with someone who was also on a horse. Marie knew more people than Philippa thought possible, but then again she'd married a Lord, the fourth son of some noble. Philippa could never remember the father's name, just that Marie's husband was called Ben.

Philippa, Marie, and Rebecca had met at finishing school and become fast friends. The only true difference between them now was that everyone was married, except Philippa.

"Perhaps he won't be so bad," Rebecca said.

"Would you be saying that if you had not fallen in love with Franklin?"

Rebecca giggled. "If Franklin were old and overweight, I would still love him."

"But I don't love Jonathan Porter," Philippa said. "I have to find a way out of this marriage."

Marie rode up next to them and said, "What did I miss? More grousing about the upcoming marriage?"

"I don't think I like you anymore, Marie," Philippa said.

"I'm just trying to ease the tension, my dear," Marie said as they started off again. "Perhaps I should find someone to introduce you to. I'm sure Ben has friends who would fall in love with you."

"For my money, you mean," Philippa said.

"I know many women who married older men," Marie said. "When they died they were left as wealthy widows who could take any number of lovers to their bed, and not be frowned upon. You should be happy with your new lot in life. Perhaps he will die in bed and you won't have to worry about it anymore. Maybe even on your wedding night."

"I don't want to be a widow." Philippa inclined her head

toward Broderick Mayfield. Why couldn't he have offered for her? He was young, and unmarried. Like her, he was the son of a wealthy man, although his father was a merchant instead of a farm owner.

"Don't even think about it," Rebecca said after they'd pulled away from the young man.

"Why not?" Philippa looked back at him. "He is quite handsome."

"And has a male lover," Marie said very softly. "It's a known fact. Why he hasn't been arrested for it is beyond the kin."

Philippa gasped. "Truly?"

"Yes, one of the young men that works in one of his father's shops. Rumor has it his father caught them, and had the young man beaten by a group of thugs."

"How awful," Philippa said. "Why can't a person love whom they want?"

"Philippa, bite your tongue," Rebecca said. Maria did not respond, which made Philippa think her friend didn't want to give too much of an opinion on the matter.

"Maybe I'll run away," Philippa said. "I can go to America. I have money of my own."

"You would break your father's heart," Rebecca said. "Philippa, darling, accept your lot in life and make the best of it."

They'd made it to the end of the lane. Traditionally, they would turn and make another round through the park, but Philippa was not feeling up to much socializing. She pulled Trainer to a stop, and her friends did the same with their mounts.

"Maybe I should go to Paris." A dreamy feeling settled over her as she thought about being in the romantic city, searching for the love of her life.

“What makes you think you’ll find someone there?” Marie asked.

“I must say, I expected the two of you to show a little more care for my feelings rather than just say I had to do as I’m told.”

“It happens to the best of us,” Maria said.

“Says the woman who is married to a man she loves.” Philippa sniffled “I’m leaving.” Without waiting for an answer she kicked Trainer into high gear, going off down a path that was not much used. Behind her, Rebecca called her name and told her to come back, then out of nowhere, it started to rain. Philippa had not been paying attention to the skies, and hadn’t noticed the dark clouds.

Philippa ignored her friend’s demands that she return and continued to trot down the path. When she came to another one she’d never explored she turned onto it. Trainer took to his new surroundings with gusto, his hooves pounding against the dirt and grass. She loosened her hold on the reins and he went even faster. Philippa leaned down toward his ears and whispered, “That’s it, darling, go as fast as you want.”

A crack of thunder echoed her words, and Trainer whinnied in fear and took off down the path. Philippa lost control of the reins and they fell to either side of the horse. Rain started to fall, and thunder rent the sky again.

“Trainer, Trainer!” Philippa tried as hard as she could to gather the reins and get her horse back under her control. But the more she tried the more she started to slip from the saddle. Trees sped by her like they were flying about on wings. She knew there was no way she was going to get hold of Trainer’s reins and stop the horse.

Moments from now she would be on the ground. She prayed it didn’t hurt too much. She’d fallen from a horse before, but never at such a speed.

“Trainer, whoa!” she yelled once more, just as another bolt of lightning rent the sky, and hail started to fall. Philippa lost her balance. Part of her knew this was the end, that she would be trampled under Trainer’s hooves as she fell, and be horribly injured.

But as she started down an arm came around her waist and pulled her upward.

“Easy, easy, I’ve got you,” a deep male voice said.

Philippa clawed at the legs of the man who held her close to him. His horse was going as fast as Trainer, but unlike her mount, when he pulled up and ordered it to stop, it did so. Philippa lifted her head just in time to see Trainer bolting down the deserted path.

“Brightwell! Brightwell, where are you?” The voice sounded from behind them. “Give us a shout out so we can find you.”

“Here,” the man holding her yelled. “Now, madam, I’m going to gently put you on your feet. Will you be all right, or do I need to hold you a few moments longer?”

“I’m all right,” Philippa said.

The man did as he’d said, lowering her very slowly until her feet were under her. When she was down he threw his leg over the front of his horse and came down beside her.

“Are you injured?”

A large piece of hail hit her arm and Philippa cried out.

“Come, we will find a physician,” he said.

“No, I’m all right,” she said. “It’s just the hail.” Philippa put her hand on her head. “I seem to have lost my hat.”

“It’s a good thing that’s all you lost,” her rescuer said. “With as fast as your horse was moving you could have lost a leg.”

“Trainer,” she said. “I have to find my horse.”

The hail started to pound down and the man took off his coat and threw it over her head. “If your horse is well

trained, it will find its way home. Now, there is a gazebo just over there. Let's hide under it until this storm lets up."

Philippa let him lead her in that direction. His horse sheltered nearby under a large copse of trees. Once they were under the gazebo the storm started in earnest, the hail hitting the wood and splattering about onto the ground.

Philippa ran her shaking hands over her ruined riding habit. She looked at the handsome man in uniform who stood before her.

"Sterling Brightwell, at your service," he said as he affected a deep, sweeping bow.

"Philippa Stockwell," she said.

"We almost match," he said with a laugh. "May I ask what you are doing by yourself on such a dreary day?"

"It wasn't so dreary when we started out," she said. "I was riding with friends and we had a disagreement. I'm afraid I acted a bit of a child and took off down the path on my own."

"Such a thing almost got you killed," the man said.

"So it would seem," Philippa said. "Are you a soldier? I'm afraid I don't know much about uniforms and the like."

"I am—I was, should I say—a member of Her Majesty's Royal Navy. I am retired now. A few friends of mine and myself were in Hyde Park to watch Her Majesty as she made her way to Paddington Station. She is making her way to Windsor. I suppose that is what you and your friends were doing on such a rainy day, also."

Philippa shook her head. "I had no idea the Queen was about. My friends and I ride every Tuesday and Thursday." She looked up at the man who had saved her, and for the first time got a good look. Her breath caught in her throat as she took in his appearance.

Tall and muscular, his short dark hair framed his face, and his deep green eyes stared down at her. For a moment

she felt as if they might swallow her whole. Then he smiled down at her, and her knees went weak.

“We need to get you back to your husband,” the man said. “When your mount shows up without you he will surely send out a search party.”

“I have no husband,” Philippa said.

“Ah, a widow,” Brightwell said. “My condolences. Was he a soldier?”

“Not a widow, either,” Philippa said. “I am a spinster.” She prayed her voice didn’t waver when she said the word.

“Surely not,” Brightwell said with a laugh. “No woman such as yourself should spend your life alone. Someone will come for you, madam, I have no doubt of it.”

Oh someone already has, she thought to herself. The thought of him makes me wish you’d never rescued me.

“Brightwell, are you abducting women and having your way with them?” A voice said from the opening of the gazebo.

“Madam, forgive my friend,” the man said. “He has no manners.”

“Your friend saved me,” Philippa said. “My horse bolted because of the storm. He ran that way.” She pointed in the direction Trainer had run, and heard someone yell, “I’ll get him.”

For the first time she realized there was not only Brightwell, and the unknown man on the gazebo steps, but two others, who were now pounding their way down the path where Trainer had gone.

“Miss Philippa Stockwell, may I present Corporal Jeremy Misstin, all around cad and sometimes gentleman. Jeremy, this is Miss Philippa Stockwell. If my knowledge of London and its environs serves me right, I would say she is the daughter of Henry Stockwell, the landowner and dairy

farmer. I hear he is making new inroads in the way food is produced in our country.”

“How did you know that?” Philippa asked. She hoped the suspicion in her voice didn’t shine through as much as she thought it did.

“I read an article in the London Times about your father,” Brightwell said. “It mentioned his land holdings and the dairy farms. It also mentioned that he had a daughter named Philippa. There can’t be that many Philippa Stockwells in London.”

Jeremy laughed. “If there’s one thing you should know about Lt. Brightwell, Miss Stockwell, it’s that he’s a voracious reader, and he retains everything. It’s a bit annoying, actually.”

“It’s maddening to you because you never learned to read, Jeremy,” Brightwell said. “Now, Miss Stockwell, we need to see you home.”

“What about your friends who are searching for Trainer?” She tried to ignore the fact that Jeremy was laughing. She was worried about her horse, and if he would make it home without her, and if he did, how Mrs. Judge and her father would react. It would be bedlam, she was sure.

“Your steed?” Sterling looked out from under the gazebo. “The storm is abating. I’m sure they will return momentarily. Horses are very smart creatures, Miss Stockwell. I’m sure Trainer will find his way home if Gavin and Brice don’t find him.”

The two men returned moments later with no Trainer in tow.

“I’m very sorry, ma’am,” the sandy haired one said. Philippa looked at Brightwell.

“This is Gavin. The other one is Brice.”

Gavin tipped his hat to her, and said, “If you’ll tell us the

mews you use we'll ride there forthwith to see if Trainer has returned there."

"It's in Mayfair, on Adam's Row."

She could see the look on both men's faces when she mentioned the location. She wanted to say, 'yes, I'm rich, but don't think too much of it'.

"We are on the way," Brice said. Both men took off in the direction Trainer had taken, and Sterling put his hand on her back.

"We should go now," he said. "There is a break in the weather, but it may build up again. Come, you can ride with me."

Brightwell mounted his horse, then held out his hand.

"I can walk," Philippa said.

"Nonsense," Sterling said. "Take my hand and we will head toward Mayfair in a moment's instance."

"I live on Chapel Street," she said. "My father will have left for his club by now, but the servants are there, and they are probably wondering where I am." Knowing this she took his hand and he lifted her as if she were a feather. Once she was seated in front of him she took hold of the reins as he gently wrapped an arm around her waist.

"Jeremy, are you ready to go?"

"As always," Jeremy answered. "Miss Stockwell, Sterling may be your knight in shining armor, but I am always willing to be his second at any time."

"I thank you, Mr. Misstin." She arched her back to keep from coming into too much contact with the muscular chest behind her. It reminded her that she would not feel it after today, that the only thing that would be in her life was the chest of an old man, with hands that were cold.

Tears prickled her eyes, but she fought them as hard as she could.

"Don't you worry, Miss Stockwell, we will have you home

The Misunderstanding

and comfortable in no time,” Sterling said. “Things will be normal once again.”

The tears fell as they started to trot back into the park. She didn't want to tell Sterling Brightwell that she had no desire for her life to go back to normal. Today was the most adventurous thing she'd ever had happen to her. And she wanted that adventure to continue.