



## The Minx Who Met Her Match

The Brethern Series

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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



Dear Readers,

Before you dive into *The Minx Who Met Her Match*...I thought I'd share a little bit about the hero and heroine. The hero, Sir Duncan Everleigh is a brand-new character who has never appeared in any of my previous 'worlds'. The heroine, Josephine Pratt, was a secondary character in my *Heart of a Duke* series. When we last saw Josephine, in *One Winter with a Baron*, she was just a girl of sixteen. *The Minx Who Met Her Match* takes place some years after that, and readers will now have an idea of what she's been up to...and better yet, who she's become.

*The Minx Who Met Her Match*, part of *The Brethren* series, in no way requires you to read previous books from my *Heart of a Duke* collection. However, if you'd like a glimpse of who she was as a girl, or the story of her eldest brother's happily-ever-after, be sure and check out *One Winter with a Baron*!

Happy Reading!

Hugs,

*Christi*

# DEDICATION



*To Rory, Reagan, and Riley  
My loves. My heart. My every joy.*



# PROLOGUE



*Almost seven years earlier*

*PLEASE, DON'T LET ME BE TOO LATE.*

Bounding up the four steps of his townhouse, Duncan Everleigh shoved open the front door and staggered into the narrow foyer, panting.

Not stopping to catch his breath, he raced onward, tripping over himself as he climbed the stairs.

The moment he reached the main landing, he looked down one end of the corridor and then the other. His gaze caught on a young maid.

“Where is she?” he rasped. The *she* in question? None other than his feckless, faithless wife.

The ashen-faced maid ducked into a room. She slammed the door, the sound of its reverberations her only answer to Duncan’s question.

Unheeding the mess his muddied boots left upon the gleaming mahogany floors, Duncan quickened his stride. With every step, rage spiraled inside him, a dizzying torrent of icy, black hatred that filled him. It consumed him, driving his frantic movements. His black boots trailed mud over the ivory carpeting. Carpeting she’d insisted upon. That he’d worked tirelessly to provide. Believing it would make a difference. Believing if he could be more, that if he could provide more, she’d, at last, be happy.

He gave another bellow.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Joy, appeared at the end of the hall,

blocking the path forward and forcing Duncan to stop as he reached her. "Where?"

Unlike the four other servants in his employ now scurrying off to their hiding places, she bravely faced Duncan, her usual cheerful smile in place. "Hullo, Mr. Everleigh," she greeted.

He seethed. "*Where?*"

Mrs. Joy's false bravado dipped, and she stole a look about. "Mr. Everleigh, *please*."

*Please.* He gnashed his teeth. The usually loyal servant spoke as though Duncan were in the wrong. As though he were the one with an empty soul. Then, mayhap he was. For in this instance, with his wife hiding in this damned townhouse on which he could barely afford the rent, Duncan was filled with a visceral hatred that soured his mouth and dug at his core. "I'll not ask you again, Mrs. Joy."

And mayhap she saw the madness surging through his being, for the ever-brave and jolly Mrs. Joy lowered her gaze and remained stubbornly silent.

Duncan dropped his eyebrows. Apparently, loyalty to the liege was forgotten in moments of madness. "I will find her myself," he vowed in a steely whisper.

There were only eight rooms in the damned townhouse. And by God, he'd take down every bloody door with his bare hands if need be. Duncan started his forward path when, from over his shoulder, Mrs. Joy's faint voice reached him.

He wheeled around.

"Mrs. Everleigh is in the guest chambers."

"The guest chambers," Duncan echoed dumbly.

*Every time he visits, he makes love to me in these rooms.*

Duncan's heart thundered with a renewed beat of hatred. Pain and sadness had long ago died... as had his love for the shrew he called wife.

He registered Mrs. Joy's pitying stare.

Heat rushed to his cheeks. By God, he'd been betrayed, deceived, and humiliated. He'd be damned if he would now be an object of pity by *anyone* because of the miserable viper he'd been foolish enough to take as his wife.

With a growl that ravaged his throat, Duncan took several jerky steps around his housekeeper. "See that my daughter does not leave the nursery," he boomed.

"Please, Mr. Everleigh." Mrs. Joy's plea pealed off the walls, following him as he fled.

Ignoring her entreaty, Duncan lengthened his strides until he'd fallen into an all-out sprint. Breath coming hard and fast, he turned the corner and stopped before the hated door. He kicked at the old oak panel, and it splintered under the force of his blow. With every kick and give of the wood, Duncan's fury eased until the door gave way altogether. In its demise came an eerie calm.

Sweat dripping from his brow, he forced his way through the gaping hole left by his efforts. His gaze did an automatic sweep of the room, instantly finding her.

His wife, Eugenia, sat at the vanity, pinching color into her flawless cream-white cheeks. "La, Duncan, you were always one for dramatics." She spoke with the casual matter-of-factness of a devoted wife who remarked upon the weather to an equally devoted spouse.

Though, they two knew that in this farce of a marriage, there only was, and only had ever been, one loyal spouse.

Odd, he'd charged to this room fueled with words and demands, and now he stood, feeling like an outsider looking in on his life, while his *wife* affixed a pair of diamond earbobs to her delicate lobes. Those casual movements brought his attention to her heart-shaped face, and he searched for a hint of the innocent he'd believed her to be.

"You needn't have destroyed a perfectly good door. One that was unlocked, no less." She giggled and patted her artful coiffure.

With hair so dark it was the color of a moonless midnight and a clear blue gaze, there was an otherworldly beauty to this woman, and he'd been captivated by her the moment he'd first caught a glimpse of her across a ballroom. Seven years ago? It might as well have been a lifetime, for all that had come to pass.

Eugenia shoved to her feet with a whisper of satin skirts that fluttered at her ankles. She angled herself in the mirror, studying her trim visage. Her narrow waist gave no hint of the child she'd



given birth to only eight weeks earlier. Eugenia caught his eye in the mirror and made a clucking sound. “Do have some pride. It isn’t becoming to lust after a woman who hates you so.”

Bitterness soured his mouth.

*Fool. You bloody fool.*

He’d not give in to her baiting, her attempts to be cruel and ugly to not only him, but also to their daughter.

“No.”

“Oh, come,” she taunted. “It is written in your eyes. Pathetic, pathetic man.”

Mayhap at one time he would have been crippled by that derision. His love for the incomparable, Eugenia Aterwall had died a swift death early in their marriage. The first month, to be precise. Just as his lust for her had also died. It was hard to feel anything more than hatred for a soulless viper like the one before him.

“You aren’t leaving, Eugenia,” he said in a steely whisper.

They both looked at the remaining trunks not yet delivered to the waiting carriage.

Eugenia tightened her mouth, and that movement twisted her expression into something macabre and hideous. A match to the ugliness of her soul. “I’m leaving.” A taunting glimmer lit her eyes.

*By God, she’s thrilling in this.* Loathing unfurled anew inside him. “You have a child.” A tiny, cheerful, big-cheeked little girl. “You’d leave Charlemagne.” Those words were spoken as much for himself, a reminder of who Eugenia was and what she sought to do.

“Goodness, she has a nursemaid, Duncan.”

“She needs a damned mother,” he cried. Even if it was one who spent more time with her lover than with her own child.

Eugenia scoffed. “I’m not letting you keep me here just so you might give me more babes I don’t want.”

Duncan surged forward, startling a gasp from the woman he would be forever bound to. He took her lightly by the shoulders and implored her with his eyes to relent. “This isn’t about me.”

“Release me,” she hissed, yanking free, and Duncan let her go. “I am leaving. With him.”

*Him.*

There was only one him—Duncan’s older brother, Matthew. Since they’d been boys, they’d vied for Eugenia’s hand. Duncan had *won* her as his wife. Matthew, however, had wooed her away—only after he’d been titled Viscount Darlington.

And now Matthew would take Charlie’s mother away from her.

“I’ll not let you do this,” he whispered, stepping into her path as she made to go around him. “I’ll see you dead before I let you go.”

His wife chuckled and, presenting him with her back, returned to the vanity. “La, there you go with your silly theatrics, Duncan,” she mocked. “As if you’re putting on one of your shows for some magistrate.” She’d always abhorred the work he did, the same work that kept her comfortable. Eugenia retrieved her white satin gloves. “Either way, I am not asking your permission. I am simply doing as I please,” she said, tugging on each scrap.

How could she simply... leave? Yet, as she carefully withdrew the diamond and sapphire bracelets and other expensive baubles gifted to her by another man and placed them in a small valise, reality slammed into him. Making this moment real in ways it hadn’t been before.

“What of Charlie?” he asked quietly. “You can’t just leave her.” He made a final appeal. “She is but a babe.” Nearly four-years-old.

“You’re wrong.” Her response ushered in some relief. “I *will* simply leave her.” At that casual reply, gooseflesh dotted his skin. “You know I cannot stand her company. She’s an oddity, Duncan.”

Then she brushed past him.

Air swooshed noisily in his ears.

She’d just walk out on her daughter, leaving Charlie with a scandal and shame once the world learned of Eugenia’s treachery. The same rabid fury that had sent him charging here from his offices roared to life. Damn her. Damn her rotted heart to hell.

From somewhere within the townhouse, a high-pitched scream went up, curdling his blood and briefly superseding his fury and pain, only to be followed by an eerie silence.

Heart racing, Duncan rushed from the room.

He staggered to a stop at the top of the landing.

*Oh, God.*

His stomach revolted.



At the base of the stairs, Eugenia lay in a tangle of limbs. Her eyes stared, unseeing, at the ceiling overhead. The obscene diamond pendant, a gift from Duncan's own brother, lay against her twisted neck.

The earth dipped and swayed, and servants came rushing from whatever hiding places they'd kept until this moment. One of the maids dropped to a knee beside the figure sprawled awkwardly between the bottom step and the marble foyer, and then she looked up at her employer. "She is"—the girl dropped her voice to a horrified whisper—"dead."

Appalled gazes swung up to Duncan.

His legs went weak under him, and he collapsed upon the top step. Whispers from below carried up to his ears as he dropped his head into his hands, and through the haze, but one word penetrated his shock and horror...

"Murderer."



# CHAPTER 1



*Spring 1822*

*London, England*

SOCIETY HAD NO USE FOR criminals—neither the ones convicted nor those who'd been legally absolved of guilt. Especially when those men had been alleged murderers.

Unless said alleged murderer was the only barrister a person might secure to represent him. In which case, a man might swallow his pride to deal with a barrister who had the blackest reputation.

Seated in his simple Curzon Street offices, Duncan assessed the pair seated across from him: Ewan Holman, solicitor and his friend from university, and the gentleman's younger brother.

No, Duncan didn't assess the *pair*. He was interested in just the notorious traitor, Lathan Holman. The slightly hobbled gentleman had entered his office a short while ago, claimed a seat, and hadn't said a word while his brother had spoken on his behalf.

"The reports have been unfavorable," Ewan Holman was saying. "But I myself have reviewed the evidence—"

"The man is your brother," Duncan cut him off. "I'd hardly say yours is an unbiased opinion of his case."

"That is fair. However..."

As Ewan continued his defense, Duncan looked to the younger Holman brother. With his long auburn hair hanging about his face

and his threadbare garments too small for his frame, the younger man didn't look like a son of any earl. In fact, as heavily scarred as he was, he didn't look like any manner of *gentleman*.

Of course, impressment changed a man. If one survived hard labor, that was. One undoubtedly returned to whatever shore one found, altered as the man before him.

"During his tenure, Lathan loyally served the Home Office, and that reputation should—"

"You would like me to take the case?" Duncan asked.

Ewan gave him a confused look. "Forgive me if I was unclear. That is *precisely* the reason I'm... *we*," he swiftly clarified, "are here."

"I wasn't talking to you." His gaze remained locked on the laconic stranger. "I was speaking to your brother."

More stony silence met that pronouncement.

Another might have been disquieted by the hard glint reflected in the youngest Holman's eyes. Younger than Duncan, Lathan was near an age Duncan had been when he was accused of murdering his wife. Back then, Duncan had also perfected a lethal stare and emotional detachment. And he'd become familiar with that hardness in many of his clients.

"*Ahem*." Ewan, the sole solicitor to refer cases to Duncan, gave his brother a pointed look... that went ignored. His expression blank, Lathan Holman remained a study in silence.

Frowning, Ewan turned back to Duncan. "He wants you to represent him. Isn't that right, Lathan? Tell him as much."

Ignoring the elder brother's attempt at eliciting a response, Duncan spoke directly to the man society was all-too-eager to see swing. "You were charged with treason and impressed."

"I know my circumstances," Lathan said, speaking his first words since he'd accompanied his brother into Duncan's cluttered offices. He removed his spectacles and dusted each of the lenses. "There were some who believed I was deserving of an opportunity to clear my name. My brother being one." His lip peeled in a sneer. "My brother being the *only* one." A harsh, ugly laugh that no one would dare mistake as humor shook his frame. "Isn't that right, Ewan?"

Ewan's scowl deepened, but he didn't rise to that bait.

Lathan had been scorned by not only Society, then. By his thinly veiled words, the younger man's family had *also* rejected him. And yet, he'd retained the support of a loyal brother, which was a good deal more than Duncan had known in terms of his family. He beat his pen distractedly along the edge of his desk. All the while, he considered Lathan Holman, his case, and the opportunities it presented. Duncan stopped tapping. "And that is what you wish me to do? Clear your name?"

"Yes." That icy grin deepened, never quite meeting the younger Holman's eyes. "Or that is my brother's idea and certainly preferable to another trip to the penal colonies."

And yet, there was a certainty; the strongest men perished from being impressed. And the ones who managed to survive did so because of strength... and luck, but ultimately, that hellish experience left them ravaged and forever transformed.

Duncan knew nothing about the man across from him other than what Society, on the whole, had gleaned from the scandal sheets: A secretary at the Home Office, he'd betrayed his superior, which had nearly resulted in the death of the unknown agent. The identity of that gentleman, however, remained a mystery, a closely guarded secret at the Home Office and the fodder of speculation. It was also crucial information that would shed light on Lathan Holman... and provide a context to a jury who'd already found him guilty in their minds.

High profile as the case already was, to Duncan it represented the opportunity for more: more funds, notoriety that would make him more than just the barrister who'd been charged with murder, and, if Duncan successfully defended an infamous client, respect from those in the legal profession, which would likely lead to referrals from more than just Ewan.

"Did you betray King and Country?" Duncan asked.

The stone-cold gentleman narrowed his eyes. "Would it matter if I did?" His cool gaze slipped around the office, lingering on the dilapidated furniture and untidy workspace. "Though I trust it's ultimately about the coin one can earn, isn't it?"

"Lathan," his brother admonished, failing to see that the jaded person beside him could never be chastised.

"It's fine." Duncan held up a palm, staying those unnecessary attempts. The young man wasn't off the mark; in fact, he was impressively close to it. Duncan's career and finances had struggled since he'd been accused of murder.

"You misunderstood the reason for my questioning." He directed that at the younger Holman. But then, Society didn't tend to be of the same opinion as Duncan, that all men and women, regardless of station or even ownership of guilt, were all deserving of a fair trial. "It doesn't matter how much money you have or could toss at me." Since the night his own life had been turned upside down, and he'd been found guilty by the world at large, some things had come to matter more than just funds. As such, Duncan didn't discriminate in cases or coins. "All people are deserving of a trial." Alas, not that *people* were of a like opinion. *People* were content to judge another and execute him based on opinions and flimsy evidence alone.

A cold smile ghosted the other man's lips. "Even the guilty?"

It was the moment he became absolutely certain of Lathan Holman's innocence. Only the innocent tossed their guilt around as a threat and taunt.

"All are equal before the law," Duncan quietly returned.

Lathan chuckled, the sound rusty and low like he'd forgotten how to laugh and had instead perfected the art of concealing all sound. "What a fanciful idea, that. All are equal."

"I didn't say that is what Society believes." Duncan leaned forward and rested his palms on the surface of his cluttered desk. "It is, however, what I believe." There were some men of honor who'd never dare take a sinner as a client. He'd made enough mistakes in his own life and connected far more with extremely flawed criminals than he did with pompous and proper barristers who'd defend only those who were unequivocally innocent.

"Ah, I see."

The other man might be hardened by the recent events in his life, but Duncan had become jaded when Lathan Holman was no doubt in Eton, an enthusiastic student with only promise and optimism for life. As such, Duncan wouldn't be goaded by him or anyone. "What is it you think you see?" he asked without



## BIOGRAPHY



Christi Caldwell is the bestselling author of historical romance novels set in the Regency era. Christi blames Judith McNaught's "Whitney, My Love," for luring her into the world of historical romance. While sitting in her graduate school apartment at the University of Connecticut, Christi decided to set aside her notes and try her hand at writing romance. She believes the most perfect heroes and heroines have imperfections and rather enjoys tormenting them before crafting a well-deserved happily ever after!



When Christi isn't writing the stories of flawed heroes and heroines, she can be found in her Southern Connecticut home chasing around her eight-year-old son, and caring for twin princesses-in-training!

Visit [www.christicaldwellauthor.com](http://www.christicaldwellauthor.com) to learn more about what Christi is working on, or join her on Facebook at Christi Caldwell Author, and Twitter @ChristiCaldwell