

Chapter One

He would have been four, her son, had he lived. Mina thought of him nearly every day.

Her husband had been dead for seven months. Mina thought of him as rarely as possible.

Her dead husband was not the father of her dead son.

Mina, Minerva Caldwell, as she was then, had not wanted to marry Harold Sparr, Earl of Sparrowdale. What young woman of eight and ten summers would wish to wed a raddled old man of so many winters? Why, Sparrowdale's son from his first marriage was older than Miss Caldwell. Father and son shared beaked noses, black hair, and a bent toward debauchery. Minerva had declared she'd never share a bed with either of them.

Her father had thought otherwise. He'd hired the best governess, sent Mina off to the best schools, all for one purpose. He wanted a title for his only child, and he wanted the government contracts such a connection could bring to his shipbuilding enterprise. The Sparrowdale son was a wastrel, and promised since birth to a duke's daughter besides, but the earl was in need of a fresh young wife to warm his old bones.

Mina would rather warm her hands at Satan's stewpot. No, she was going to marry Ninian Rourke, a handsome, fair-haired youth with a promising future.

"Wed my assistant foreman?" her father had bellowed. "Like hell you will!" He'd gone on planning the nuptials the way he ran his business and reared his daughter,

with no dissent, no delay, and no one deciding anything but himself.

So Mina and Ninian had eloped.

They'd changed horses and carriages and names and directions, to throw off any pursuit on their mad dash north. They'd finally reached the Scottish border long after dark, long uncomfortable days after setting out. They'd found an inn, declared themselves husband and wife in front of the innkeeper and his wife, and gone up to the slant-roofed attic room provided for their wedding night.

The whole affair had lacked the romantic touches a girl dreamed about for her marriage. There was no beautiful dress, no flowers, cake, or champagne toasts. The inn did not even offer a hot bath, only a can of lukewarm water and a basin, and a narrow bed with a faded cover. Mina was too tired to care. She did care—too late—that the room had no lock on the door.

"But we are already married!" she'd cried when her father and Lord Sparrowdale and his son burst into the attic chamber. An avowal in front of witnesses made it so in Scotland, Mina was sure. "Tell them, Ninian."

"We are—" Ninian had begun, only to have his words stopped by her father's fist.

"Like hell you are!" Malachy Caldwell had shouted, pulling Mina from the bed and shoving her toward Lord Sparrowdale. Shivering in her shift, Mina had pleaded, but the earl pushed her and a bundle of her clothes behind the privacy screen, while his son ogled her bare legs and licked his lips.

Sobbing, Mina got dressed, still hearing the sound of fist against flesh. She also heard the clink of coins when her father tossed a pouch at Ninian Rourke. "There, take it and get out, and never come back or I will see you rot in hell. You never knew my daughter, d'you hear? Say it, you cur, say it out loud. You never knew Minerva in the past and never will in the future."

And Ninian said it. And meant it. He forgot she ever existed.

“And you’ll do the same, my girl,” her father had ordered, “if you know what’s good for you.”

Like hell she would. How could Mina forget her lost love when she might be carrying his child?

Sparrowdale had wanted to marry her despite the possibility, so great was her dowry, so deep his debts. Mina had even fewer choices then, after her father nearly broke her jaw. She could run away and starve in a ditch, or she could marry the earl. She was ruined either way, but if there was going to be a child, her child, she had to protect it.

So Miss Minerva Caldwell and Harold Sparr, Earl of Sparrowdale, were wed under the auspices of the church and the crown and the accountants.

Mina’s second wedding night was almost as awful as her first. Lord Sparrowdale found as little pleasure in this marriage bed, with a weeping, wan bride threatening to cast up her accounts at the first touch of his cold, gnarly fingers. If the earl could not enjoy his young wife in the country, he was more than content to enjoy her dowry in London with its gaming hells and houses of convenience. Part of his bargain with Moneybags Malachy, though, was to see Minerva established among the *beau monde*. Sparrowdale dragged his new countess to town with him and to a couple of balls and breakfast parties, then delegated his son to accompany Minerva on the social rounds. Having her escort fall down drunk or start a brawl was part of her introduction to so-called Polite Society. So was hiding in the ladies’ withdrawing room, cowering behind her fan, and pleading headaches, which were all too real.

The *ton* dubbed her Lady Sparrow. Like her namesake, Mina was commonplace in appearance, brown-haired, small of stature, and plump. Of course she was plump; she was, in fact, breeding. Mostly what she was, in the eyes of the gossipmongers and the matrons, the gentlemen at their clubs and the dowagers at tea, was common, as common as dirt or the little birds who pecked for seeds there. Her mother might have been an

Albright of Lincolnshire; her gowns and jewels might have cost a king's ransom; but her father was in Trade.

Mina was never going to be accepted in London society, nor in the smaller circles of Berkshire, when Lord Sparrowdale finally let her return to his estate before her pregnancy became too obvious. The countryfolk surrounding Sparrows Nest already despised the dissolute lord and his profligate son. Rumors of Mina's prior elopement convinced her neighbors that she was no better than the rest of the family, and no better than she ought to be.

Mina was so miserable that she did not care. She was having a difficult pregnancy, and despaired of her future with the earl and his shifty-eyed son, Harmon, Viscount Sparling. Luckily the Sparrowdale gentlemen—if such a word could be applied to the two—were too busy in London spending her father's money to bother her much.

Lord Sparrowdale did return when Mina was close to term, along with his son and nephew, and other hard-drinking, high-stakes-betting cronies. They were carousing in her parlor while Lady Sparrowdale was suffering through childbirth above. Mina had no mother to help, no aunts or married sisters to give comfort, no experienced neighbor ladies to lend support. She had the disapproving servants, the physician the earl had sent for along with his none-too-gentle nurse, and her cousin Dorcas.

Her mother's cousin, actually, Dorcas Albright was a spinster gentlewoman of a certain age and uncertain nerves. She was afraid of thunder and sickness and horses and men. If she had not been more terrified of poverty, she'd have left Malachy Caldwell's home years ago, and Lord Sparrowdale's when he returned from London. She clutched her vinaigrette when Mina's contractions began. She clutched her heart when the water broke. She clutched the bedpost when Mina moaned. Then she fainted altogether, thank goodness.

When Mina would have cried out with the pain, the physician dosed her with laudanum. "We would not want to disturb the gentlemen, now, would we?"

Mina would gladly have disturbed them with her

screams—and her father back in Portsmouth, too, and that lily-livered Ninian Rourke, wherever he was. But then, after hours that felt like years, the physician announced that she had a son.

She heard him wail. “Let me see him,” she managed to say.

“No, he is too weak. The nurse has him. We cannot be too careful with these early births,” the physician told her.

“But he is not early. He is—”

A strange-smelling cloth was placed over her nose and mouth. “All you have to do is rest.”

When she awoke, they asked her to name the infant, for his funeral. “Robert,” Mina said through her tears, for her grandfather Albright. She would have called him Robin in private, a trespasser at Sparrows Nest. Robert was enough.

They kept her drugged through the ceremonies and the condolence calls, then she poured her own laudanum rather than face her grief, so she would not hear that one loud wail forever in her mind.

Her husband, thankfully, had no interest in a befogged, forlorn female, so he returned to London, where the sickness that was already in him worsened. Without Sparrowdale’s scant influence, his rakehell son grew more reckless over the course of the next few years until he was killed in a knife fight after being caught cheating at dice.

Sparrowdale returned to the country then, perhaps thinking to father a replacement heir, but he was too old, too ill, and Lady Sparrow was too embittered now to let the foul-breathed relic come near her. No longer a trembling girl, she had been managing Sparrows Nest in the earl’s absence, learning to run a profitable estate, keep accounts, and handle servants and tenants alike. Mina was her father’s daughter after all, and she had nothing to lose by closing her bedroom door—and making sure it stayed locked this time. The earl had her dowry and a competent chatelaine. That was all he was going to get.

Mina did nurse Sparrowdale in his last months. She had given her vows, through sickness and health. Cousin Dorcas was no help, naturally, and the servants regarded the old man and his disease with equal fear. The earl called Mina by the name of his first wife, and she did not care.

Now they were all dead—her husband, his son, her father. Malachy had contracted a congestion of the lungs on his way to Sparrowdale's funeral and died in the same bed as his son-in-law had. Mina had nursed him too. She'd have done the same for a sick dog.

For all she knew, Ninian Rourke was dead too, and she did not care about that either. She barely recalled his looks, only that he had taken her father's purse. Well, he had his money, the same as the earl had. Mina did not waste another thought on either of the men she had married.

Perhaps her father had done her a favor, saving her from wedding a weakling. But then her son might have lived and she'd have that joy. Perhaps not. Who could understand the vagaries of fate?

The one favor her father had definitely done for Mina was to outlast Sparrowdale. Now she was wealthy beyond counting, with no husband to claim her fortune as his, no trustee other than Mr. Sizemore, her solicitor. Lady Sparrow was twenty-three, a countess, an heiress, a widow.

She placed a small bouquet of flowers on the grave of the son who was not her husband's. Now, she told herself, now she had to spread her wings.