

## Chapter One

*Monday, 13 January 1679*

I hardly remember when I first noticed her, the girl who would change everything. She was simply there one evening, huddled in the narrow overhang of a tavern near my home, soliciting spare change from passersby.

For all of her beauty—and despite her dirt-smudged face and dull brown hair, she was indeed a pretty young poppet—she appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary beggar, or possibly a prostitute, the sort of girl London devoured in one quick bite. Her thin wool cloak seemed woefully inadequate, for it was now January and winter held the city firmly in its grasp. As I dropped a farthing into her outstretched palm I knew it would do little to ease her suffering, but beyond that, I didn't pay her much mind. I had troubles enough of my own to contend with.

During the past six years I'd made a good living disguised as Mistress Ruby, a fortuneteller and healer catering to London's elite. But the murder of one of my customers three months prior had left my life in pieces. My body still retained some evidence of the terrible assault I'd suffered as a result of my investigation into the killing, and visits from patrons to the room in Coal Yard Alley where I conducted my business had fallen off drastically.

Worst of all, my friend and bodyguard, Sam Turner, had gotten it into his head that he was no longer any use to me. He disappeared with nary a word several weeks ago, leaving my household and my life woefully incomplete.

Given these circumstances, I had neither the time nor the inclination to sort out wayward girls. But the following day she crept closer and the day after that closer still, until finally, she sat cross-legged on the cobbled stone pathway in front of my house in Covent Garden, a modest timber structure with four rooms on each floor and three stories high. My housekeeper, Alice, first alerted me to the girl's presence when she returned from emptying a chamber pot.

"There's a beggar outside, m'lady," she said as she entered the kitchen, where I sat sharing a supper of baked oysters and mallow salad with my waiting woman, Charlotte. "'Tis a shame, really, she's such a pretty little thing, naught but a child. I told her to move on but she insists on talking to you."

"Did she say what she wanted?" I asked.

Alice shook her head. "She said only that she wanted to speak to Lady Wilde."

"She asked for me by name?"

"Aye."

The bite of bread I'd been chewing went dry in my mouth and I took a sip of ale to wash it down. Since I'd been one of King Charles II's mistresses for the past sixteen years, it wasn't unreasonable that she'd know my identity, though I'd never been one of his more notorious women. But even apart from my association with His Majesty it wouldn't be difficult for someone to learn my name.

It was absurd that her presence at my home would make me nervous, but Sam's abrupt departure had made me more anxious than usual. It didn't sit well that a stranger, even one as seemingly harmless as this child, should suddenly appear upon my doorstep.

Charlotte, who'd listened to the exchange with wide eyes, now continued to eat in silence. She'd been in my employ for only a few months but even so I could tell that she was unnerved, as was I.

Enough, I thought. What sort of existence would I have if I allowed a mere child to frighten me? I didn't need Sam or anyone else to protect me, least of all from a little girl.

"Bring her inside," I told Alice.

When she entered the kitchen I recognized her as the waif I'd recently seen in town. Here in the light, she was as pretty as ever, with a well-sculpted nose and high cheekbones. But the winter cold had taken its toll; her skin was red and chafed, her lips cracked and bleeding.

She bowed her head and curtsied. "Thank you for letting me in, Lady Wilde. I did so want to meet you."

Her voice was timid and she had a strange accent I couldn't quite place. "What business do you have with me?" I asked in a tone perhaps more harsh than the circumstances called for.

"My name is Susanna Barber, my lady."

My intake of breath was audible. The name she uttered, Susanna Barber, was that of my long-dead mother.

"What game are you playing?" I said, frowning. "Tell me your real name!"

"My lady?" Charlotte said, reacting to me. "Is something amiss?"

"She calls herself by my mother's name!"

The girl's eyes welled. "You're angry. I've made a terrible mess of things, haven't I?"

"Tell me the truth then," I said. "Who are you really?"

"'Tis the truth. My name is Susanna Barber, I swear it. My father was Adam Barber. I'm your niece."

I stepped back, stunned. What she said was impossible. My brother Adam died of the plague in 1665, unmarried and without children. In fact, he died utterly alone, for I'd spent that year in Amsterdam and my younger brother, Lucian, had left London with the king and his court when the pestilence began its scourge upon the city. That Adam had succumbed to the illness with no one to look after him haunted me to this very day.

She darted her amber-colored eyes around the kitchen as though she was searching for a route of escape. Adam's eyes had been green, like our father's. My own were brown, as were my brother Lucian's. I examined her features for other evidence of the Barber family and found none.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"I turned twelve in March."

Charlotte finally spoke up. "You don't talk like the English. Where're you from?"

"I'm as English as you are, I'll warrant," she said. "But my mother took me to America when I was a baby."

There was but one question on my lips. Was Adam still alive? If she was indeed my brother's child—and I didn't yet believe that she was—she would know what had happened to him. But somehow, I couldn't bring myself to ask. I wanted to imagine the possibility he might still be living just awhile longer.

"You must be hungry," I said instead. "Alice, fix her a plate."

Alice busied herself with the task whilst I continued my questions. "You're alone?"

"Yes," she said.

"You're rather young to be traveling such a distance by yourself."

"I had no choice, my lady. My mother died six months ago."

"Who was your mother?"

"Her name was Ann Sutton." Her eyes lit up. "Did you know her?"

I thought back to the months before I'd left for Amsterdam. I couldn't remember anyone with that name. Alice brought a plate to the table and I told the girl to sit and eat. She set upon

the food as though she hadn't eaten in days, scooping it up with her fingers, giving no thought to politeness. I'd heard about the wild ways of the New World, but I'd never met an American before. Was the girl merely hungry or was this the way they all consumed their food?

When she was nearly finished, I returned to our conversation. "I don't recall ever meeting anyone named Ann Sutton."

She slumped her shoulders. "I know you don't believe me, Lady Wilde. But I'm here because I've no other family."

"It's true then, your father is also dead?"

She nodded, wiping her fingers on her brown shawl. "He died before I was born."

I swallowed the lump that rose in my throat. Upon first hearing the girl's story, I'd retained the faint hope that Adam had traveled to the American colonies with his wife and child, despite all evidence to the contrary. Charlotte gave me a sympathetic glance. I turned my head to the side so that the girl couldn't see my face and wiped away the tear that brimmed in my eye.

"Surely that's not the only reason you're here," Charlotte said, giving me a moment to gather myself. "What do you want from Lady Wilde?"

"It is! I swear on my mother's soul I wanted only to meet you—and my Uncle Lucian. Mother told me about him, too."

"Why did your mother take you to America?" I asked.

A shadow crossed her face. "After my father died, my mother was so poor she had to steal to get by. She was caught taking a loaf of bread and transported to the Maryland Colony as punishment."

I couldn't believe this. "My brother apprenticed with one of the most successful goldsmiths in London. Why, he made the regalia for the king's coronation! It's impossible he would leave his wife penniless."

"But it's true, Lady Wilde."

"If that's so, how'd you get the money to pay for your journey to England?" Charlotte asked.

"My mother left me with a little money when she died, along with this." She put her hand in her pocket and pulled out a ring. "My father made this for her. She told me she'd rather starve than sell it."

I leaned forward and held out my hand. "May I see it?"

She passed it to me and I turned it around in my fingers, examining it. The ring was crafted of gold and set with a large sapphire that glinted in the candlelight. The inside shank bore Adam's maker's mark, which I recognized immediately. A ruby ring with this mark sat locked in my jewelry box upstairs.

For the first time, I began to believe that Susanna Barber might actually be Adam's daughter.

I held the ring up. "My brother gave me a ring very much like this one before I left London to go to Amsterdam in 1665. When I returned to London the following year, I learned that he'd died, a victim of the plague."

Her eyebrows came together in a point over her nose and her forehead wrinkled. "I fear you've been misinformed, Lady Wilde. My father didn't die of the plague."

I clutched the ring a little bit tighter. "How, then, did he die?"

Her befuddled expression turned to shame. "Your woman is right," she said quietly. "I didn't return to London just to meet you, though now that I'm here I'm glad to have done it. But I confess I had another reason."

“What is it?” I asked, full of trepidation.

“My father was murdered, Lady Wilde. I came here to find his killer, and I hope that you’ll help me.”

**Thank you for reading this sample chapter of *Mistress of Lies*.**

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