

## June to September 1666

### Chapter 1

The fissure ran across the floor in the backroom of Reynard Ashwin's tailor shop, running up the wall a few inches, and seemed to grow larger every day. Reynard worried that rats hid below, squirming under him in the dark. Stuffing remnants of fabric in the gap, he hoped it would be enough to keep whatever lurked below out of his shop, but knew it probably would not last the day. The bell on the front door rang, drawing his attention to the customer who had entered.

"Mr. Brantingham, how pleasant it is to see you," he said, closing the door to the back room, and glancing at his assistant with a questioning look. He turned his blue eyes to the chubby man. "I did not think your measurement was scheduled until tomorrow."

"Quite so, Mr. Ashwin," Brantingham replied, fluffing his curled hair with a plump hand while looking at the tall, light-haired (wigless, he was jealous) proprietor. "However, I have free time now, and came by in the carriage, thinking you would be able to fit me in. I presume there is not a problem."

Brantingham was a difficult customer; always wanting something impossible. "Make me look thin and tall," he had said with the last outfit. However, you couldn't stretch silk and linen that far before its delicate weft frayed apart. A good walk would do the man good.

"No problem at all." Reynard said, hoping the Durham twins' appointment didn't have to be rescheduled—they were due in a few hours, and he needed to be finished before they arrived.

"The last hose was a fancy tight and split. My dear Dorcas tried with all her might to repair them. However, she is not as keen with the needle, as one might expect, and ended up making matters worse." Brantingham rambled continually during each appointment on many topics, including the ones in which he was inept. "Did you get any of that gorgeous blue silk in, as we discussed? I would like that for my breeches."

Reynard had not been paying attention, and was taken off guard; he had been daydreaming of his lovely wife, Fine, and their newly born boy, Jerome. The long pause exasperated Brantingham.

"I'm sorry. Do I bore you, Mr. Ashwin? I would think a paying customer would receive a better response than silence."

"Oh, Mr. Brantingham, I sincerely apologize. I mean no disrespect to you or your topics," he said, thinking quickly of an answer to the question that hung hazily in his mind. "I was merely attempting to remember whether I did receive your blue silk, and whether I have any left; I believe I do. I will have to confirm that, of course. Silk is quite popular."

"I hate to presume anything, Mr. Ashwin, but I was sure you would have kept that solely for me."

"I do apologize again, Mr. Brantingham. I received two tones of blue silk, as I recall, and of course I saved the better of the two for you."

"Splendid." Brantingham's mood relaxed, and he continued his rambling conversation to Reynard's deaf ears.

Finally, the measuring ended without much time before the Durham twins arrival.

“I will have everything ready for you in a week.”

“A week?” he moaned. “I was hoping you would be timelier than that. I was planning to wear it to my Christiana’s recital Tuesday.”

“Three days, Mr. Brantingham? What about the fi—”

“Oh marvelous, Mr. Ashwin, I knew I could count on you for your expedience. I will see you Tuesday afternoon.” He smiled, and left Reynard standing with his mouth agape—the man had a manner about him that did not allow *no* from anyone. At least he paid well, more than the charges requested, but that didn’t give him the right to be a pompous windbag. Brantingham’s carriage jolted to the side as he stepped up into it.

Reynard’s assistant, a good lad and worker, immediately began working on Brantingham’s suit. The Durham twins came and went, giving him a moment to look over his assistant’s work.

“It’s been a long day. You can go home, and finish in the morning.” He watched the young man leave, then returned to the backroom. The smell that greeted him was foul and thick. He pawed through the neatly stacked fabrics but couldn’t find the source—could a rat, dead under the floor, be the cause of the stench?

The remnants he stuffed into the crack were gone. He presumed the rats had pulled them down with them. Was the crack wider than it was earlier, or were his eyes playing tricks on him?

Crouching, he peered into the crack. The distinct smell of death wafted up, making him dizzy. He shook his head.

He returned to the main room to retrieve the kettle from over the fire. He poured the boiling water into the fissure. Steam rose from the opening with the sounds of agonizing screams. Horror filling him, he stepped back.

What was down there? He had never heard such a sound before. He leaned forward, trying to see what was down there, but all he saw was writhing shadows.

In moments, the screaming ended, and the stench dissolved into the air. He felt as though unseen eyes watched him. He looked around the room at the stacks of cloth, but saw nothing. Heart pounding, he retreated from the room, and slammed the door.

He looked around the room, still sensing someone or something watched him. Goosebumps covered his arms, and the hair on the back of his neck rose. The pieces of Brantingham’s outfit draped over a rack, fluttered in a draft.

Trying to concentrate on putting the piece of the outfit together, he couldn’t stop his imagination creating heinous acts beneath the floor in the back room. He closed his eyes, rubbing his temples.

He opened his eyes, glancing at the back room door. Was it only his imagination, or did he actually hear the blood curdling screams? Imagination, he concluded. The stench, he rationalized, came from the street when a breeze blew from the open door, though the front door had not been open, and there wasn’t a window in the back room. Glancing at the pieces of cloth laid out on the table, he decided to call it a night.

The metal poker clicked against the slow burning logs in the fire as he poked and stirred them so they would keep some warmth in the shop until morning when he returned. After blowing out the candles, Reynard made his way to the door in the faint glow from the fire place. Without looking back, he shut the door.