

## SURREY, ENGLAND ~ MAY 1808

Eloise had a premonition that the kite flying would not go well. It was too cold and too windy, and Margaret was too excited about the whole affair. But then, perhaps it was not fair to complain about the wind since wind was an essential part of the exercise. Tying a formidable knot in her bonnet strings, Eloise snatched up the side of her skirt with a firm hand and followed along after Margaret at an almost unfeminine clip.

Margaret had her eye on an open place in the cow pasture between the rail fence and the old ash tree in the middle. Fortunately, it had not rained for three days. If it had, Eloise was certain that her half boots would have sunk up to the ankle in mud. Experience was a harsh mistress—more than one pair of her half boots had become wholly unserviceable after such an outing.

“Margaret, hold up!” she called out. The twelve-year-old girl was already half a field ahead, toting a Japanese printed kite with a tail as long as a line of dancers at a country assembly. “Isn’t this far enough?”

“No, you’re too close to the road,” said Margaret with certainty. “I don’t want some carthorse coming along and getting tangled up in my imperial kite.”

“All right then,” huffed Eloise, still managing to keep her hem out of the dirt as she hastened along. She was not altogether pleased that Mother had insisted she accompany Margaret on this adventure. Fresh air was all well and good, but she had the sneaking suspicion Margaret intended her to play the pageboy’s part on this quest. A pretty fool she’d look if one of the squire’s sons came riding by while she was running across a field and lofting a kite into the skies. Eloise smoothed a dark brown curl behind her ear. As her luck would have it, it would

no doubt be Mr. *Thomas* Allen, the elder son, freshly home from his abbreviated Grand Tour and only too willing to raise a supercilious eyebrow at his country neighbour's antics. It was rumoured that he'd returned from his tour under a cloud, but as nobody knew exactly what that cloud consisted of, he could still lord it over the neighbourhood as a consummate cosmopolitan.

"Now then," said Margaret, "this is just the place. I'll let out the string a little. You come hold the kite, and at my signal run to the right and let loose."

"Are you sure that's such a good plan? I daresay you're a much better runner than I am, especially in these boots."

"Nonsense," said Margaret doggedly. "You can run a fair pace when there are no gentlemen watching. I daresay all your comportment lessons haven't damaged your legs so far."

Eloise knew any objection would be fruitless. Her sister was seven years younger, and still, she managed to rule their household with the command of an old dowager. Approaching Margaret, she held out her hand for the blue silk kite. A gust of wind sent the tail streamer curling around her arm like the snake she'd seen with a troupe of travelling performers. At the same time, Margaret was whirled around and barely managed to stop the kite from being wrenched out of her grasp. Laughing, the sisters tried to disentangle themselves, spending a good several minutes sorting out the string, the sail, and the tail.

"Now then," repeated Margaret, anxious to launch her birthday gift. "I shall let out the line while you bestir yourself."

It would have been much easier for Margaret, in her shorter schoolroom skirts and white pinafore, to run through a cow pasture; a young lady with muslin skirts down to her ankles found it a far more trying endeavour. But grudgingly, Eloise agreed to do her sisterly duty. Glancing around to make sure the road by the pasture was empty of onlookers, Eloise took a firm handful of fabric, exposing her ankles and calves enough to give her mother apoplexy had she been watching. She would not care if Master *William* Allen saw her playing the hoyden. He was half a year younger than her and not so stuff-shirted that he could not remember all the times they had raced down the lane in younger days. But Mr. Thomas Allen was another matter....

The wind whipped the kite tail around like a dervish. Eloise barely managed to avoid being struck in the face by the long black strip of silk as she took a few running steps and then tossed the silken sail up into the air. Her greatest fear was that the toy would immediately be dashed to the ground and she would be forced to run again and again. But the spring breeze was sprightly enough to snatch up the sail and keep it. The blue kite with the painted pagoda fluttered overhead as Margaret took several steps backward, letting out more string and moving away from the road toward the ash tree.

"We did it!" exclaimed Eloise, taking some pride in her own contributions. "How long will it stay aloft, do you suppose?"

"Oh, ages," said Margaret, as if she were not a mere neophyte who had received her very first kite at the breakfast table this morning. Eloise wondered if she herself had been so self-assured at that age, before the slings and arrows of a rocky debutante season had made a target of her.

"Ages," as it turned out, was more metaphorical than actual. Within a quarter of an hour the sky turned stormy. Rather than maintaining an even keel, the kite began to dip and bob in the waves of spring clouds pouring in. Margaret strained at the line. Heedless of its tether, the kite began to pull her every which way, tugging her further backwards and eventually plummeting like a shooting star into the limbs of the ash tree below.

"Oh dear," said Eloise, noting the tremble afflicting Margaret's lower lip. "Perhaps we ought to go back to the house and see if Patrick can come with a ladder to get it down." Patrick was their gardener and man-of-all-work, old in years but still spry enough to help the young Blackburn misses disentangle themselves from predicaments. He had once been the head gardener at the neighbouring estate but had been dismissed with nary a pension when the new mistress took a dislike to him.

"I don't think it's very firmly lodged. It might fly off again while we're gone." Margaret stared at her big sister thoughtfully. "Haven't you climbed this tree before?"

"Me?" gasped Eloise. "Well, yes, but it's been over a year since I did that. And you may not recall, but I borrowed Patrick's breeches for the event."

"You haven't got a train, and those skirts don't look very heavy." Margaret paced around her sister, examining her costume. "If you take off your boots and I give you a boost, I daresay you could reach that kite in a trice."

Eloise groaned. She had been called a sad romp enough times to dislike exposing herself to further criticism. Why did it have to be Margaret's birthday? On any other day she could have insisted on summoning Patrick and be done with it.

Margaret opened her arrestingly large eyes as wide as possible and gave a few long, calculated blinks. "Of course, if you don't want to try, I suppose I could just take the chance of losing my birthday present—"

"Oh, very well," snapped Eloise. She was not heartless enough to refuse that plea, but she did not have to express any happiness about the situation. Checking the road once again for any inconvenient travellers, she leaned an arm against the trunk of the ash tree to support herself while Margaret knelt down with alacrity and unbuttoned the half boots.

"You'd best take off the stockings too, so you can grip with your toes."

Eloise shrieked as Margaret's cold knuckles brushed against her leg. It was a good thing Mother—and Mr. Thomas Allen—couldn't see her now or there would be even more hand-wringing and sneering than there had been at her first ball.

Her bare toes curled around the sparse grass blades under the mighty ash tree, appreciating the softness of the loamy dirt. It was late spring, the rains still frequent, the sun still scarce, and the foliage still in its prime. Above her she saw nothing but a canopy of lush green.

"Take off the bonnet too."

Eloise fiddled at the firm knot in the ribbons until it came loose and then hung the trimmed straw bonnet on a protruding knot in the tree.

"Ready then?" Margaret held out two hands clasped together like a stirrup and hoisted her sister into the air like a stablehand. At first, Eloise scrambled to find purchase on the lowest branch, but she soon succeeded in pulling up one knee, then another, edging with care up the narrowing limbs. "Good effort!" called Margaret from below. "Nearly there!"

“I can’t see a thing,” said Eloise. The leafy canopy surrounded her top half like a cloud. She twisted to the right to pull aside the branches and grimaced at the feel of her sleeve catching on the twigs and at the sound of muslin ripping.

“Hullo there,” said a disembodied voice from out of the leaves. “Is this your kite?”

## SURREY, ENGLAND ~ MAY 1808 (TEN YEARS LATER)

He leaves parted revealing the owner of the voice. Eloise found herself staring into a pair of very blue eyes in a very tan face. A muscled forearm extended the lost birthday present. As Eloise's jaw dropped, the stranger gave a wink.

Shrieking and flailing, Eloise lost her grip on both the branch and the situation. If not for quick thinking on the part of her new acquaintance, she would have fallen out of the tree altogether. As it was, she spent a very uncomfortable minute or two being manhandled back onto the branch, steadied against a strange man's chest, and then carefully lowered down from the ash tree until her bare toes were dangling just low enough to drop gracefully onto the grass. Mouth still agape, Eloise put a hand to her mussed curls and began to pick out pieces of moss and bark.

"Thank you!" called Margaret to the unexpected stranger as he passed down her precious pagoda-painted birthday present. "Aren't you coming down too?"

"Mmm...better not," said the blue-eyed man. Squinting up at her rescuer, Eloise could see that he was a broad fellow in buckskin breeches and shirtsleeves. Whereas she had removed her half boots to attempt the climb, he seemed perfectly at home in his tall boots, perched upon the tree limbs like the rigging of a ship.

"And why not?" demanded Margaret. It was the same question that lurked on the tip of Eloise's tongue, but she knew Mother would be mortified to see her talking to a man to whom she had not been properly introduced.

"Do you see that group of riders over there?"

Eloise's gaze followed the line of his outstretched arm, and she glimpsed a group of horsemen just coming into view along the narrow ribbon of brown road. "My cousins are playing a game of hide-and-seek with me, and I don't fancy them finding me if I can help it."

"Cousins?" Eloise shaded her eyes to peer farther down the road. "It looks like Squire Allen and his men to me." She shot a suspicious look at the man in the tree. "Who exactly did you say you were?"

"I didn't," said the fellow, giving her another wink. Good gracious! He tossed those things around like sugar plums during the holidays! "But, since you asked, my friends call me Crispin."

Eloise reddened. She was nineteen years old, and she was certainly not going to call a strange man by his given name.

"Hello, Crispin!" said her sister earnestly. "I'm Margaret and this is Eloise, and we are ever so grateful that you rescued my kite. Not to mention Eloise's head. I know it's not an easy thing to climb in skirts, but I didn't think she'd be such a ninny as to let go of the branch altogether. Did you?"

"I did not," said Crispin, echoing Margaret's serious tone. "I was watching her progress with interest, and when she took off her stockings, I thought, 'There's a lass who knows her way up to the tops'ls! She'll work her way up to the crow's nest before the minute glass runs by.' But perhaps she lost her nerve halfway up?"

Eloise was not sure whether to be more affronted by Crispin's boldness or more embarrassed by his observations about her stockingless ankles. "I've nerve enough to ask just how you might be related to Squire Allen? We know the family quite well, and I've never heard of any relations who are...sailors."

The man in the tree gave a laugh but no answer, and Eloise, after catching herself staring at the triangle of tanned skin that led down to his collar-less shirtfront, looked away with a blush. "Well, I daresay we can ask Squire Allen himself about the connection as he seems to be heading this way."

The party of half a dozen horsemen had indeed turned off the road into the far end of the cow pasture, and Eloise could see one of the younger men hailing her with waving hand.

“Oh, but Eloise,” said Margaret in a low and hurried voice, “it would be most unkind to reveal Crispin’s whereabouts. Do you want him to lose the game with his cousins?”

“Margaret!” hissed Eloise, pulling her sister close and speaking in a fierce whisper. “We have no idea who this stranger is. For all we know he could be a cutpurse or a highwayman.”

“Eloise,” said Margaret reproachfully. “I hardly think a highwayman would have taken such pains to keep you from falling on your head.”

“Very true,” said the disembodied voice, Crispin having ascended once again into the leafy canopy. However, now that the young ladies knew he was up there, they could pick out his outline through the still-patchy spring foliage.

Eloise fumed inwardly, but there was no time to argue further as the first rider was galloping ahead of the group and thundering across the turf in their direction.

“Eloise. Margaret.” The rider tipped his hat, but Eloise could see the side of his lip curl as his eyes flicked over her dishevelled appearance and bare feet. Pugs and pomander balls! Why did she always have to make a fool of herself for Thomas Allen’s amusement?

“There’s been an unpleasant incident up at the Abbey. Did you see a man coming this way on the road? Dressed in buckskins and a canvas shirt?”

“No, we’ve seen no one on the road,” said Margaret, offering a statement that was deceptively true without even the hint of a blush.

“What sort of incident?” Eloise demanded at almost the same time. If the fellow in the tree were a scoundrel, they had every obligation to surrender his whereabouts.

Thomas hesitated. “It’s not necessary to explain the whole matter to a pair of young ladies, but the gist of it is that the fellow was trespassing.”

“Oh, I see,” said Eloise sweetly. “Much like Margaret and I are doing right now?” For the cow pasture whose grass was curling beneath her toes did in fact belong to Squire Allen.



"Nothing like," said Thomas shortly. "You're old friends of the family, and you know our grounds and library are always open to you when it's not inconvenient to the household."

"Very generous of you," said Eloise dryly. Once upon a time she had availed herself of that hospitality, but a certain incident this past autumn had attenuated her interest in visiting Allen Abbey. "And this canvas-shirted fellow, he happened to want to borrow a book at an *inconvenient* time, I suppose?"

"What? No. What rubbish you talk, Eloise."

Eloise pressed her lips together. "Miss Blackburn, I do believe you mean. I may speak rubbish, but I do insist on the proper civilities."

Thomas rolled his eyes. William, his younger brother, was now within calling distance. "I say, Maggie! El! What are you doing out here? Climbing trees?"

"Proper civilities?" said Thomas acerbically, noting that his brother received no rebuke for *his* mode of address.

"Oh, my old friends are quite at liberty to use my given name," said Eloise, opening her eyes wide and giving Thomas a long, slow blink to put him in his place. It was an action she would never have dared on the dance floor or in the drawing room, but somehow, standing in this field with the wind whipping her hair and the grass dewing her feet, she felt unusually adequate to the situation.

"What's this about a trespasser, Will?" Eloise asked, pointedly turning her body to cut Thomas out of the conversation.

"Oh, he showed up yesterday and then came poking around again today. Father says he's not who he says he is..."

"I'm sure we don't need to bore Miss Blackburn with all that," interjected Thomas, just when Eloise was hoping some light might be shed on the subject twenty feet above them. "They've seen no one on the road."

"Blast! I knew we ought to have gone the other way."

"Yes, well, Father thought he saw the fellow start out in this direction. Perhaps he cut across the field to the village."

A loud voice thundered across the pasture, and Eloise could hear the Allen boys being summoned by their ponderous paterfamilias.

"We'll let you get back to...whatever it is you were doing," said Thomas with open disapprobation.

"Climbing trees, I'll wager," said Will good-naturedly. Eloise saw her buoyant friend squinting up at the branches of the ash.

"Flying kites!" interjected Margaret, sensing the danger of discovery. "Have you seen my new birthday present?" She thrust the pagoda-painted kite toward the horn of William's saddle for him to admire.

"What a cracking good kite!" said the younger Mr. Allen, entering into the spirit of the thing. He examined the frame and the fabric with a generous eye.

"Come on, Will," said Thomas, cutting the exchange short. "We need to check the other road."

With a wave to Eloise and Margaret, Will handed back the kite and pulled around the head of his mount. The brothers trotted to the far end of the pasture and turned back on the road with their father the way they had come. A few moments passed. The riders turned into black silhouettes on the horizon, like little paper cutouts, and then disappeared over the hill.

"I think it's safe to come down now," said Margaret.

Crispin lowered a leather satchel to the ground and then swung himself down from the branches of the ash tree. "I see my cousin Thomas is an unmitigated oaf," he observed with amusement.

"Yes, well...yes," said Eloise, finding nothing else to say to that.

"I'm obliged to you ladies for keeping my whereabouts a secret. My relatives have been less than cordial upon my arrival in England."

"If they *are* your relatives," retorted Eloise. She glared fiercely at him and then turned away, his blue eyes too disconcertingly frank to abide for long.

Crispin combed a hand through his nut brown hair. "The proof of the matter is that I suspect they'll be back before long to look for me again. Those are family relations for you. They can't stand to leave a gentleman alone."

"You'd better come for supper at our house," said Margaret decisively. "Eloise heard Mr. Thomas tell one of his particular friends that he'd rather be caught dead than dining at Westbrook, so there's no chance of him finding you there."

Eloise flamed red. "Margaret," she hissed. "There's no call to share *that* with a stranger."

Crispin's eyes crinkled with laughter, increasing Eloise's discomfiture. "I, on the other hand, would be delighted to dine at Westbrook."

"Splendid," said Margaret, rolling up the long tail of her kite for easier transport.

"Margaret!" remonstrated Eloise again. "It's not your place to be inviting strange men over for dinner. He's not even a gentleman!"

"And just how did you come to that conclusion?" Crispin's demeanour was unflappable.

Eloise stole a prim glance at the open collar of his shirt front and the tan skin of his neck. "A gentleman would be wearing his coat."

"A lady would be wearing her stockings." There was that dratted wink again.

"He does have a point," said Margaret sensibly.

Forced to concede, Eloise tried to salvage the shreds of dignity left to her by insisting that the stranger turn his back while she re-attired herself for the walk home.

"As you wish, Miss Blackburn." His voice seemed to linger on her last name. "Although we've been standing here for some time, and I think by now I've committed to memory the way your ankles look."

Incensed, Eloise nearly tore one of her stockings in her haste to pull it on. While Margaret knelt down to button her boots, she jammed her bonnet over the brown curls escaping from their pins and tied the ribbons so tightly that she could feel them digging into her chin.

Satchel thrown over his right shoulder, Crispin offered his left arm to Eloise. "I may not have a coat," he said cheerfully, "but I am at least aware of the manners of a gentleman. Lead the way, Miss Margaret!"