

spies
in the
sky

BEVERLEY McWILLIAMS



SPARKING
IMAGINATION,
CONVERSATION
& CHANGE



Chapter 1

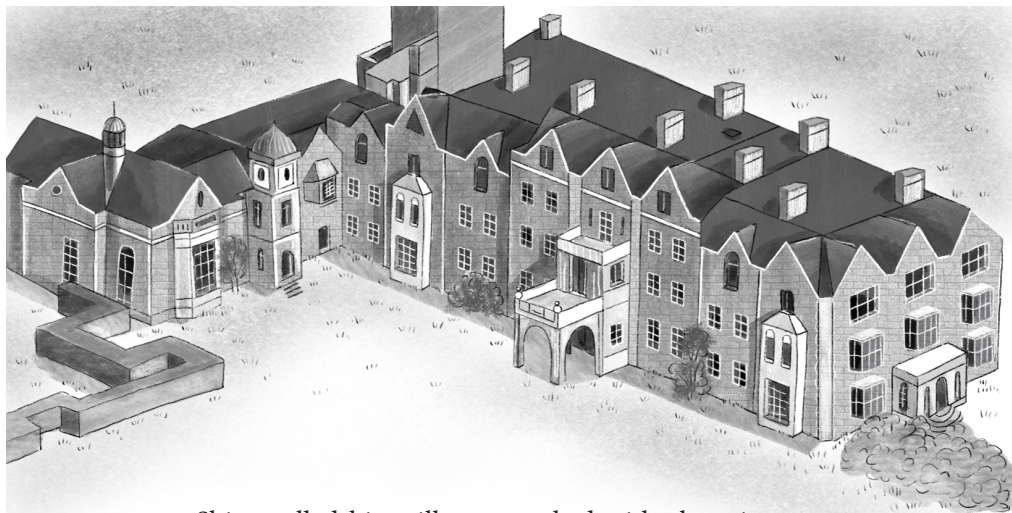
Racing Blue

Sandringham Estate, Norfolk, April 1940

The rhythm of my wings beat against the gentle breeze. The air was crisp and cool but filled with the scent of spring. Just weeks ago, a dusting of snow had covered the ground, but now the land was carpeted in colour. Below me, sunshine-daffodils bloomed and fragrant magnolias peeped through gaps of towering pines.

I turned at the stables towards Sandringham House. The green dome on the roof shone like a beacon in the morning sun. I soared over the pointed gables and clusters of red-brick chimney stacks, across the perfectly pruned formal gardens and neatly trimmed lawns.

I glanced behind me. Khan was rapidly approaching. I tilted my head and flapped, faster and faster, following the meandering stream past the lake guarded by the ancient oak. A sharp left took me over the cobbled lane where Old



Shire pulled his milk cart packed with clattering crates. He whinnied a greeting, but there was no time to chat.

The turrets of the village school were in sight. My heart thumped. My feathers tingled. I concentrated all my energy, straining my muscles and pounding my wings. The loft came into view. I swooped and focused, preparing for a smooth landing. If I hit the trap at the correct angle, I didn't have to stop on the landing board. That saved at least three seconds, and every second



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counted when you were in a race. I dipped my head and tightened my tail feathers, steering straight through the dangling bobs and sweeping into my box as delicately as the sway of a dandelion clock. A perfect landing.

A welcoming party bounced and flapped their wings.

‘Blue, you’re back already.’

‘How do you do it?’

‘You’re so fast.’

‘Did I win?’ I asked, puffing up my feathers. But of course, I knew I did. Khan was good, but I was so much better.

Thud!

Khan pushed through the trap and landed in the box to my left – a little less gracefully.

‘Bad luck, Khan,’ I said. ‘But there can only be one champion. Get your breath back and we’ll go again.’

Khan flopped onto his feathered bed. ‘No way, Blue. I’m exhausted. And anyway, we were lucky not to get caught. I saw Ernie wandering the gardens.’

I strode over and prodded him with my beak. ‘Come on, Khan. Where’s your spirit? If we’re going to win the National, you’ll have to try harder than that.’

Khan looked at me and cocked his head. ‘We?’

‘Well, me,’ I said. ‘But you might come second if you keep working on it. I’m sure I can see an improvement in your flight muscles. Although ...’ I walked in a slow circle around him, ‘your appearance leaves a lot to be desired.’



‘What’s wrong with my appearance?’ Khan squeaked.

Unfortunately, Khan didn’t have the advantage of being a blue bar pigeon like me, with shiny silver-grey feathers and a distinguished black stripe. Khan was a grizzle breed, and his dappled appearance made him look like he’d been sprinkled with salt and pepper. He was a little plump, one of his feet turned outwards, and he had a tuft missing at the crown of his head from when he’d got into an argument with a sparrow.

‘You just need to smarten up a little,’ I said, flicking the dust from his feathers. ‘When we race, we’re representing royalty. When they award us our medals, we must be a perfect example of a pedigree pigeon. You never know – King George might even come to watch the presentation. How wonderful that would be.’

‘We haven’t got a chance of winning a medal, Blue. We’ll be competing against pigeons who’ve been racing for years. You can’t expect to fly in there and take the trophy.’

‘Yes I can.’ I stretched out my wings and preened my glossy feathers. ‘Remember, my father won the first National he flew.’

‘How could I forget?’ Khan said. ‘You’ve told me at least a hundred times.’

I didn’t like to brag, but it was hard not to be proud of my prestigious stock. I was descended from the first British royal pigeons given to King Edward VII by King Leopold II of Belgium. King Edward and his son were

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so fascinated by pigeon racing that they built their own separate lofts so they could compete against each other in national races. But it was my great-great-grandfather, King Edward's pigeon, who took the first royal trophy, winning the National Flying Club Grand National from Lerwick in 1899. Since then, every generation of my family had been prize-winning flyers.

'But Blue ...' Khan shuffled awkwardly, 'are you sure you're ready for a proper race?'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'Competing against hundreds of highly trained pigeons is very different from racing around Sandringham with me.'

'Don't you think I'm good enough?' I shook my head. 'I can't believe my best friend doesn't have faith in me.'

'It's not that I don't have faith in you, Blue. It's just that—'

'What?' I huffed.

'I don't want you to be disappointed if you don't win.'

I softened. 'I won't be disappointed because I will win. I have the speed of my father, the intelligence of my mother and a pure bloodline that stretches back to the first pigeon racers in Belgium. If anyone is destined for greatness, it's me.'

My ears pricked. A familiar whistle floated through the air.

'Ernie's coming,' I said, nudging the wooden plank back in front of the dangling metal rods on our trapdoor. 'Quick.'

I checked our secret exit was secure and flew back to my box just in time.

Ernie pushed on the gate and strolled inside. ‘Morning, my beauties,’ he said, raising his cap.

Ernest Steele, or Ernie, as we called him, was the royal loft manager. He’d lived on the estate all his life and loved Sandringham just as much as I did. His family farmed the land, and his father had won countless trophies and cups for his famous Sandringham pigs. But it wasn’t pigs that thrilled Ernie. It was pigeons. There was nothing Ernie didn’t understand about pigeons. He knew the right mix of feed to give the shiniest feathers, and he could recognise and treat every disease from pigeon pox to canker. But more than anything, Ernie was our friend.

He wandered along our rows of boxes, peering into each. I quickly straightened my stray feathers and flicked the grass from my toes. Ernie stopped beside my box. I nestled into my bed as though I’d been there all morning.

‘Do you think I don’t know what you’ve been up to, Royal Blue?’ Ernie scrunched his mouth and his bushy moustache twitched, which was about as angry as he could look. ‘I saw you and Khan racing around the gardens.’

Ernie knew every pigeon by name and could pick any of us out of the flock, even in flight. This was nice, but it meant I couldn’t get away with anything.

He lifted me from my box and stroked his hand down my back.

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‘You’re a fine young bird, Royal Blue, and one day I believe you’ll be a great one, but you can’t work by your own rules all the time. We have a training regime. If you over-exercise you’ll inflame those muscles and I’ll be forced to rest you.’

Ernie had this theory that too much practice was not good for young pigeons. He wanted to build us up gently. But I just wanted to race. All this gradual training and these dull rest days just slowed things down.

‘What am I going to do with you?’ Ernie said, smiling. He kissed the top of my head and ruffled my feathers. He could never stay cross with me for long.

Ernie opened the door of the aviary, which stretched the length of our loft.

‘In you go,’ he said, guiding Khan and me through the door. ‘You two can take a rest while the others go out for their morning flight.’

I glared at Ernie. My beak dropped. I’d escaped many times before, but he had never punished me.

‘This is for your own good,’ Ernie said. ‘I don’t want you overdoing it.’ He scratched my head with the tip of his finger. ‘Don’t worry, you’ll still get fed.’

Ernie walked away, leaving us trapped in the aviary. Khan and I watched helplessly as he opened the hatches of the loft, and one by one, our friends soared into the sky. My neck feathers swelled. My face flushed.

‘I can’t believe Ernie locked us in here.’ I huffed.

Khan shrugged. 'To be honest, I'm tired anyway. And at least we still get breakfast.'

Breakfast might be all Khan was worried about, but how was I ever going to be a first-class racer if I missed my practices? I peered through the mesh of my prison roof and watched the other pigeons circling in the sky and heading north across the gardens towards Sandringham House. I clenched my beak. I wanted to be out there stretching my wings, not stuck in here like a jailbird. This wasn't fair.

I stomped up and down. There must be a way to get out of here. I pushed at the door with my head, but it didn't budge. I perched on the handle and stretched my beak through a gap, tapping at the lock. But it was hopeless. I could manoeuvre my way through a closed hatch, but not through a bolted door.

'Just leave it, Blue,' Khan said. 'We'll not get through that door, however hard you peck it. Relax and take a dip in the birdbath.'

I flew back to my perch, stood on the edge and stretched my wings wide.

'What are you doing now?' Khan said.

'Making the best out of a bad situation,' I replied.

I counted to three, clapped my wings, then launched myself through the air, flapping furiously.

'Stop,' Khan called. 'There's not enough room in here.'

I flew around and around and around the aviary. It was a little cramped, the turns were rather sharp, and it was

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awkward avoiding the hanging branches and scattered perches. But I could do this. Negotiating obstacles at speed was good practice.

‘Please stop,’ Khan called. ‘It’s dangerous. You might hurt yourself.’

I ignored his plea. Faster and faster I flew. I was good at this.

‘Blue, at least slow down,’ Khan begged. ‘If you’re not careful, you’ll—’

Whack!

Crack!

My head hit the mesh wall at full speed and I plummeted to the ground, creating a cloud of sawdust in my wake.

‘Blue!’ Khan flew down and prodded me with his beak. ‘Are you alive?’

I opened one eye and then the other. ‘I’m alive.’

‘Did you hurt your wings?’ Khan asked.

My wings? Panic shot through me. I couldn’t afford an injury, not to my wings. I stretched my feathers. ‘How do they look?’

Khan examined me. ‘Fine,’ he said. ‘All feathers are still tightly in place.’

My body flopped. ‘This is so frustrating.’

‘Let’s play,’ Khan bounced like an excited puppy. ‘I spy with my little eye something beginning with ...’

‘Really, Khan? I’m not in the mood for silly games.’

‘Something beginning with K,’ Khan continued.

I groaned. 'You know "cage" begins with a C, right?'

'It's not "cage".' Khan's eyes sparkled. 'Try again.'

I looked around. 'Are you sure it begins with a K?'

Khan nodded.

'It's not "Khan", is it?'

'Nope.' Khan grinned. 'Do you give up?'

'Yes. I give up.' I sighed. 'What is it?'

'King George!' Khan said, puffing out his chest. 'I win.'

'It's supposed to be something you can see,' I said.

'That's the idea of the game.'

'I *can* see King George,' Khan replied. He stretched his neck and peered out of the aviary. 'At least I could see him a few minutes ago. He must have gone.'

I narrowed my eyes. 'You're trying to cheat,' I said.

'I'm not trying to cheat.' Khan's voice wobbled. 'I saw King George. I really did.'

'I suppose he was dressed in his robes and wearing a crown?' I snorted.

Khan shook his head. 'No, just a suit and a cap. But it was a very smart suit and cap.'

'So, what makes you think it was King George? You don't even know what he looks like.'

'Yes I do. Maggie has a photo of him in her nest. She got it from a magazine,' Khan said. 'She showed me.'

Maggie, Sandringham's resident magpie, loved to fill her nest with bizarre trinkets. Beads, bottle tops, buttons, shiny string and pretty paper. It wouldn't have surprised me if she'd had a photo of King George among her treasures.

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‘If King George was back at Sandringham, then Ernie would have told us,’ I said. ‘And I’m sure the King would’ve visited. We are his pigeons, after all.’

‘Maybe he’s just arrived.’ Khan fluffed his feathers. ‘Perhaps I was the first one to spot him.’

‘Or maybe you’ve got sawdust in your eyes again, and it was the gardener.’ I chuckled. ‘Or the maid.’

Khan scrunched up his face. ‘Don’t believe me, then.’ He shrugged. ‘But I’m telling you, King George is back at Sandringham. You just wait and see.’



Chapter 2

The royal lofts

I couldn't sleep last night thinking about what Khan had said. I was sure he'd been mistaken. Ernie had told us it wasn't safe for the royal family to visit Sandringham anymore because of the war. Maggie always boasted about the 'good old days' when the procession of cars piled high with luggage announced the royal arrival. When music drifted from the ballroom and the Princesses' laughter filled the air. The older pigeons talked of the days when King George visited the lofts and selected his favourite birds to race. They said that sometimes he would even wait by the loft to congratulate the winners. Khan and I never knew those glorious days as the war started before we were born. But what if Khan was right? What if the King was back at Sandringham and we finally got to meet him? My heart fluttered at the thought.

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The bell rang at the village school across the field. The children's cheerful voices faded as they piled through the doors, ready for the day. That meant Ernie would be here at any moment. He always arrived just after school started. Ernie was never late.

I prodded Khan. 'Morning, sleepy beak. Time to get up.'

Khan slowly opened one eye.

'It's a beautiful day for a race,' I said.

Khan shut his eye.

'Come on.' I nudged him. 'The early bird catches the worm.'

'I don't like worms,' Khan mumbled.

'Where's your enthusiasm?' I poked him again, but this time a little harder, and he rolled out of his feathered bed with a groan. 'The sun is shining. The birds are singing. And it's Tuesday – the best day of the week.'

Every Tuesday, Ernie took us on a training toss. As much as I enjoyed flying around the estate, being packed into a basket and driven somewhere I'd never seen was so much more exciting. With each training flight, Ernie took us further and further from our home loft so we could practise our navigation and flying longer distances. That way we would be ready for the big race when that day finally came.

'Don't you just love going on a training toss?' I asked.

'Not really, Blue.' Khan yawned and stretched his wings. 'To be honest, I prefer flying around the estate.'

Last time Ernie took us too far, and I didn't recognise anything. It was so hard to find my way back.'

'But you found your way back, and that's the point, Khan. You learned to use all your navigation skills. You didn't just rely on landmarks and familiar scents.'

'I still missed breakfast.' Khan sighed.

'And what does that mean?'

'It means I was really hungry.'

'No, it means you need to practise more,' I replied. 'Next time you'll fly faster, and you won't miss breakfast. Remember, when we race in the National, we'll need to navigate over five hundred miles to make it back to our loft.'

'But that's so far, Blue,' Khan said. 'I'm not sure I'll ever be able to fly five hundred miles.'

'Of course you will,' I said. 'You can do anything if you set your mind to it.'

I glanced out of the loft, and there was Ernie, right on time. He strolled through the door, his cap in his hand.

'Morning, my feathered friends.' A warm smile peeked out from beneath his moustache. 'Are you all ready for today's training flight?'

I glanced around at the other birds. I was certainly ready, but no one else looked quite so motivated.

Ernie checked us over one by one. He liked to make sure we were in tip-top condition before we raced. Ernie didn't call it a race, of course. He called it 'training'. But every flight was a race to me. I needed to use any

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opportunity to demonstrate my skills and prove I could be the best racer in the royal lofts.

‘I wonder where we’re going today,’ I said as Ernie bundled us into our wicker baskets and carried us to the van.

‘What if we go north? Will we try to fly the Wash?’ Khan asked.

The Wash was a huge bay that separated Norfolk from Lincolnshire. It was a perfect place to practise crossing water, but something we had so far avoided.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘If Ernie takes us north of the Wash, we can just fly around, like we did last time.’

‘But one day we’ll have to fly over the water, won’t we, Blue?’

My feathers prickled. Although I would never admit it, the thought of crossing the ocean terrified me. There was nowhere to land if the weather turned, and pigeons weren’t built for floating. But Khan was right. We couldn’t avoid it forever. After all, there was no time to waste when you were in a race and the quickest route was across the water. But I didn’t want to think about that. Not right now.

Our baskets jiggled as the van trundled along the twisty country roads. Ernie had taken us to Norwich on our last training toss. That was the first time we’d flown over a big city. There were so many buildings, cars and people, and the air smelled different: thicker and smoky. I hoped we were going somewhere exciting like Norwich again.

We hadn't driven very far when we stopped. Ernie opened the door of the van, and the scent of the briny ocean filled the air.

'Where are we?' Khan asked.

I gazed out the window of my basket. I knew this place. 'We're at Snettisham Beach – where Ernie took us for our first training flight.'

'Phew.' Khan grinned. 'A nice easy one. We'll be back for breakfast in no time.'

I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed. We'd done this flight several times before. I'd hoped we were going somewhere different, somewhere more exciting, somewhere more challenging. If I was about to embark on a five-hundred-mile race then I needed to be flying much further distances than the few miles back from Snettisham Beach.

Ernie unlocked the clip on each basket. I fidgeted impatiently, waiting for my turn. Of course, I would catch up with the other pigeons. That's why Ernie always let me out last. But I still hated waiting.

With a click, the door of my basket swung open. I ducked through the hatch and soared up and away. I knew this place so well. I didn't even need to circle to get my bearings. I flew above the sand dunes that bordered the beach and over the reed beds and marshlands. Today the tide was out, revealing miles upon miles of mudflats, where wading birds and pink-footed geese perched. But the beautiful beach had changed since we'd last been

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here. Coils of silver wire with sharp spikes ran along the shore as far as my eyes could see. Behind them, dotting the sand and half-hidden by pebbles and rocks, were peculiar five-sided structures with thick walls. An uneasy feeling stirred inside me.

I left the beach behind and headed east over the village of Dersingham. I soared above the ivy-clad cottages and towards the railway station. A whistle screeched. An engine huffed. Plumes of billowing smoke puffed through the air. Perfect timing. I pounded my wings in time with the rhythmic rumble as the train rattled away from the station and rolled along the tracks. Faster and faster. The train clattered. My wings pulsed. But however hard I tried, I couldn't keep up. The train edged away from me, leaving behind a haze of smoke and the scent of soot. I'd beat it one day.

I glided past the patchwork farms, over a carpet of purple rhododendrons where swallow-tailed butterflies flittered. The sky was clear and cornflower blue. The sun was warm on my wings, and I was right where I loved to be.

I turned over the woodland and across the welcoming Norwich Gates. Ernie was pulling up in the van as I landed on the roof of my loft. I flew down to greet him.

'Goodness me, Blue.' Ernie gathered me into his arms. 'You beat me again.'

Of course I did. I could do that flight blindfolded, with one wing tied behind my back.

I nuzzled into Ernie's chest and felt the gentle vibration of his pounding heart against my feathers.

Ernie scratched the top of my head. 'Sorry, it wasn't much of a challenge today,' he said. 'There's a lot going on at the moment. But I'll leave the hatch open so you can have a fly around the estate after breakfast.' He shook his head. 'Not that locking the hatch would stop you.'

Ernie smiled, but it wasn't his usual cheerful grin. He looked distracted. And I felt that uncomfortable twist in my stomach again, like something wasn't quite right.



Later that morning, when Khan had finally finished eating every scrap of seed he could find on the loft floor, we took advantage of the open hatch and flew out across the gardens. We sat in the shade of the handkerchief tree. Its delicate white flowers fluttered in the breeze.

'Do you want to race to Appleton House?' I asked.

Khan groaned. 'I've had enough flying for today. Why don't we bathe in the fountains or have a picnic on the lawns?'

'Let's get a bit more practice in first,' I said. 'Then we can relax.'

'But Blue, I've just eaten a huge breakfast.' Khan patted his bulbous stomach with his wing. 'I don't want to be sick. Remember the rule. We're supposed to wait half an hour after eating before we race.'

I screwed up my face. That was a silly rule. ‘Okay, I’ll go by myself then. You can time me.’

‘Can’t you just rest and enjoy the lovely weather?’ Khan rolled onto his side and stuck his wing in the air. ‘It’s a perfect day for catching rays.’

‘There’s no place for idleness if I’m to be a champion,’ I said. ‘I’ll fly to Appleton House and back. You count how long I take.’

Before Khan objected, I clapped my wings and launched into the air, across the lawns, towards Appleton House.

Nestled among the trees in its own quaint garden, Appleton House wasn’t big like Sandringham, but it was perfectly beautiful. I crossed the square beds of velvety roses and followed the footpath that weaved its way between the hedges of box and yew and along the avenue of azaleas. Smoke billowed from the clusters of lofty chimney pots, and two bikes leaned against the ivy-clad wall. That was peculiar. Like Sandringham, Appleton House had stood empty for as long as I could remember. But there was no time to find out who the visitors were, not if I was to beat last week’s record. So, I turned and flew back.

Khan was still sitting beneath the handkerchief tree when I landed, his wings and tail spread wide.

‘Well?’ I said. ‘How did I do?’

Khan swallowed back a yawn. ‘Great. You were really quick.’

‘How quick?’

Khan’s face flushed pink.

‘You did count, didn’t you?’

‘I got up to twenty,’ Khan said. ‘But then I got distracted.’

‘You mean you fell asleep.’

‘The sun was so warm on my feathers. I couldn’t help it,’ Khan cuddled up to me. ‘I’m sorry, Blue. Counting just isn’t my thing.’

‘I’ll have to go again, then.’ I sighed. ‘This time, stay awake.’

As I stretched my wings, preparing for take-off, the squeal of the siren sounded.

Khan pushed my wing down. ‘Don’t even think about it, Blue,’ he said. ‘You know we have to return to the loft when the sirens go.’

‘I don’t know why,’ I said. ‘It’s just a siren.’

‘Ernie told us that the siren means danger.’ Khan lifted his wings over his ears. ‘Please, Blue. Let’s go back to our box, where it’s safe. I don’t like this.’

I groaned. There was always something getting in the way of my training. ‘All right,’ I mumbled. ‘We’ll go back. But I’m not hanging around the loft if it’s another false alarm.’