

# ACROSS *the* BLUE

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A NOVEL

CARRIE TURANSKY









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father planned to entertain. She lowered her gaze and looked around the drawing room. Coral patterned silk covered the walls, and heavy gold-and-coral drapes hung around the four tall windows. On her right, an elaborately carved white marble mantelpiece surrounded the fireplace with a gilded mirror above.

The furniture the previous owners had left behind looked as though it had been made for the room—overstuffed chairs and couches in matching shades of coral and gold, a grand piano, and several tables and display cases.

Sylvia's face glowed as she looked around the drawing room. "If we pushed back the furniture and rolled up the carpets, this room would be large enough for a ball."

Bella smiled, her heart warming as she watched her sister. Sylvia had recently turned eighteen and would take part in the London season for the first time that spring. No doubt her beauty, charm, and caring disposition would make her shine among the other debutantes. In a few weeks, she would probably have a line of suitors eager to win her hand. But their parents had a firm list of qualifications, and they would only give their consent to a young man from a wealthy, respected family who was in line to inherit a title and an estate.

Memories of Bella's past two seasons rose in her mind, dampening her spirits. She had suffered through a series of ill-fated introductions and unpleasant pursuits by young men who had nothing more in mind than marrying her for her future inheritance. It had been painful and embarrassing, and she didn't want to repeat it this year.

If she ever married, it would be for love, to a man who cared more about her than her fortune.

Mr. Fielding motioned toward the doors on the outer wall. "These open onto the south terrace and lawns, with a view to the fountain garden and the sunken gardens beyond." He pushed open the doors and stood aside for the family to pass through.

Bella stepped outside and pulled in a deep breath of cool, fresh air. The February morning was clear and bright with only a slight breeze that teased her nose and carried the scent of tilled earth and cedar trees.

The gardens were neatly trimmed, but mostly brown while they waited

out their winter's rest. She crossed her arms against the chill and was glad she'd left her coat on for the tour of the house.

A low buzzing came from beyond the trees, and she turned and scanned the field across the road. The persistent noise grew louder, but she couldn't see its source.

"What is that racket?" Her father frowned.

Mr. Fielding lifted his hand to shade his eyes and looked across the road. "I'm sorry, sir. I have no idea."

No sooner had those words left his mouth than an airplane swooped over the tree line and flew across the field toward them.

Bella's mouth fell open, and she lifted her hands to her heart. "It's a flying machine!"

Sylvia gasped and clutched Bella's arm.

"By George, it is!" Her father glanced over his shoulder at the family, his grin spreading wide. "Look at that! Just like the one we saw in France!"

Bella's mother hurried to his side. "But it looks different from Mr. Wright's flying machine."

Last August the family had been on holiday near Le Mans when they heard Wilbur Wright planned to demonstrate his Wright Flyer at a racetrack not far from the city. They joined journalists, aviation enthusiasts, local dignitaries, and townsfolk to watch the American aviator fly his airplane for the first time in Europe. After waiting several hours, they'd finally watched him take off with ease. He circled the field several times before he landed with a precision and skill that outshined every other aviator in Europe. The crowd went wild and rushed onto the field to congratulate him and take a closer look at his amazing flying machine. It was a thrilling memory she would never forget.

"Who is that aviator?" Her father pointed across the field. "And what is he doing flying at Broadlands?"

The airplane's wing dipped, and the pilot circled back toward the trees.

"I don't know, sir. But I'll certainly look into it. He shouldn't be flying over Broadlands without your permission."

Bella was about to protest and tell Mr. Fielding her father was an avid supporter of aviation, but the airplane's engine sputtered and cut out. The flying

machine tilted to the left, and the nose dipped toward earth. Bella gasped and lifted her hand to cover her mouth.

The airplane descended at an alarming rate and landed hard, sending a shower of brown grass and leaves into the air as it bumped across the field with its left wingtip dragging along the ground.

Before the plane came to a stop, her father hustled down the terrace steps and jogged toward the road.

“Charles, be careful!” Mother called.

Bella pulled away from Sylvia and hurried after him.

“Bella, come back!” Her mother’s words reached her ears, but she didn’t stop. What if the pilot was hurt? She couldn’t stand at a distance when he might be injured and need assistance.

The gray-haired agent passed Bella and soon caught up with her father. She grabbed up her skirt and ran across the road and into the field after the men.

They approached the plane from the back, and as they came closer, the pilot ripped off his flat cap and slapped it on his leg.

“Are you all right?” her father called, making his way around to the front of the airplane. Bella and Mr. Fielding followed close behind.

The pilot lifted his head and scowled at her father. “I’m fine, but my airplane isn’t.”

Bella released a shaky breath, thankful he was not injured.

He grumbled under his breath as he climbed down and stalked toward the wing. Ignoring them, he squatted to examine the crumpled wingtip buried in the dirt.

“This is disastrous.” He lowered his goggles and dropped them around his neck.

A jolt of surprise traveled through Bella. He was not middle-aged like Wilbur Wright. Instead, he looked as though he was in his early twenties, close to her age. She studied his face for a moment, noting his unique amber eyes and strong jaw. She had the distinct impression she’d seen him somewhere before, though she couldn’t recall where.

The pilot ran his hand through his dark-blond, wavy hair, then brushed the dirt away from the wingtip and tugged on one of the support wires. Shaking his head, he rose and limped a few steps toward the body of the plane.

Bella's heart clenched, and she reached out her hand. "You're limping . . . Are you sure you're not hurt?"

He glanced her way, and some unreadable emotion flickered in his eyes. "It's an old injury. I'm all right." But his gruff voice made his frustration clear.

The sound of horses' hooves traveled across the field, and Bella looked up. A large farm wagon pulled by a team of two came through the trees and rolled toward them.

"Who is that?" Her father looked at Mr. Fielding and then nodded toward the wagon.

"I'm sorry, sir. I've never seen him before."

Her father sent Fielding a pointed look. "There seems to be a lot happening here at Broadlands that you know nothing about."

Fielding's face turned ruddy. He stepped toward the pilot and cleared his throat. "Who gave you permission to conduct your flying machine experiments at Broadlands?"

The pilot turned his glare on Fielding. "You own the air over this field?"

"No, Mr. Grayson is the owner of Broadlands, and this is his private estate."

The pilot huffed. "Well, he doesn't own the sky above it, and I certainly didn't intend to land in his field."

"Whether you intended to or not, you've crashed your flying machine on his property. It's much too dangerous to be conducting your experiments so close to Mr. Grayson's home."

"I had control of my plane even after the engine died. I wouldn't have crashed into his house. I would think that's quite obvious."

Bella could hardly hold back her smile. The aviator was not only handsome, but he was also quite clever and able to hold his own against the stuffy agent.

Fielding narrowed his eyes. "There is no need to be impertinent, young man."

The pilot's eyes flashed. "I'm not being impertinent. I'm simply stating the facts."

Fielding looked ready to argue that point, but her father lifted his hand.

"I'll handle this, Mr. Fielding." Bella's father stepped forward. "I'm Charles Grayson, the new owner of Broadlands."

The pilot shot Bella a quick look, then met her father's gaze. "James Drake, the owner of this Steed IV." He nodded toward his downed flying machine.

The wagon rolled to a stop a short distance away. An older man wearing a long rumpled overcoat and red necktie climbed down. A breeze sent his long white hair flowing back from his angular face. He looked at least seventy, but he moved with the agility of a much younger man. Two lads, who looked about twelve or thirteen and who were dressed in simple country clothes, climbed down after him.

"James, are you hurt?" The older man strode around the plane toward them.

James's expression eased. "No, but the wing is damaged and I'm afraid the wheel supports are bent."

"But you're all right?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

The older man approached Mr. Grayson. "Good morning, sir. I'm Professor Thaddeus Pierpont Steed, and you are?"

"Mr. Charles Grayson of Broadlands." Her father glanced toward the house.

"Ah, I see." The professor smiled. "And you've met my protégé, Mr. James Drake?"

"Yes, we've met."

"Good. We're pleased to make your acquaintance." He smiled at Bella. "And this young lady?"

"My daughter, Isabella."

She smiled at the professor.

He nodded to her, then shifted his gaze to Mr. Fielding. "And you, sir?"

"Fielding is my name. I'm Mr. Grayson's estate manager, and as I was saying to that young man, Broadlands is a private estate. No one should be flying so close to the house."

The professor lifted his index finger. "Ah, that is a very good point." He shifted his gaze to the flying machine. "And as you can see, Mr. Drake had

turned away from the house and was headed back toward Mrs. Shelby's farm. That's where we have our workshop and are conducting our experiments."

Mr. Fielding cocked his head. "Mrs. Martha Shelby?"

"Yes sir. She is a very kind friend who has allowed us to use her farm as our base of operations. Her large open fields are ideal for takeoff and landing."

Mr. Fielding leaned toward her father and lowered his voice. "Mrs. Shelby is one of your tenant farmers, sir. She's a widow and manages Green Meadow Farm with the help of her son."

Her father nodded. "I see."

A thrill raced through Bella. They were conducting their experiments right here at Broadlands. Perhaps she'd see Mr. Drake flying again soon.

The professor studied her father for a moment, and then his dark eyes lit up. "Are you *the* Mr. Charles Grayson, the owner of the *Daily Mail*?"

Her father straightened and puffed out his chest. "That's right. I own the *London Herald*, the *Evening Standard*, and the *Daily Mail*."

The professor took hold of her father's hand and pumped it heartily. "Well, sir, we are certainly very happy to meet you."

Her father smiled, looking pleased the professor was aware of his reputation. "I'm very interested in aviation. I often say it's the next great frontier and worthy of government and private support."

"We couldn't agree more, could we, James?" The professor beamed a smile at James and lifted his white eyebrows, looking as though he was trying to send a message to the young pilot. James gave a brief nod but returned a questioning look.

Her father cocked his head. "I suppose you've heard about the prize offered by the *Daily Mail* to the first aviator who flies across the English Channel?"

"We have, and I believe we're very close to perfecting our design and setting the date for our first attempt." The professor clamped his hand on the young pilot's shoulder. "I have every confidence James will be the winner of that prize."

James straightened, and a smile tugged up the corners of his mouth, making him even more handsome.

"That's wonderful!" Bella looked at her father. "Wouldn't it be amazing to see an Englishman fly across first and beat the French?"



“It certainly would. I can’t wait to silence all those naysayers who insisted it could never be done and mocked us for offering that prize.”

Bella stifled a smile, recalling her father’s outrage when a rival newspaper posted an editorial saying it would make as much sense to offer one thousand pounds for the first flight to the moon.

“A successful flight across the Channel might finally make those government officials wake up,” her father continued, “and get them moving forward with a commitment to support aviation.”

Professor Steed gave a firm nod. “Convincing the government of the value of aviation is a very worthy goal and the best way to ensure Britain’s defense in the future.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Her father’s eyes shone as his gaze traveled over the airplane. “How soon will you be able to repair your machine and continue your test flights?”

“It shouldn’t take too long to rebuild the wing and straighten the wheel supports.” The professor scanned the plane once more. “With any luck, James should be back in the air in two or three days.”

“Unless we continue having issues with the engine.” James shot a perturbed glance at the propeller and engine behind it.

“Yes, we can’t risk a Channel crossing until we solve that puzzle, as well.” The professor’s brow creased, and he slipped his hands into his coat pockets.

Bella’s gaze shifted from Professor Steed to James. Surely he wouldn’t attempt another flight until they were certain the engine was working properly. “Flying with an unreliable engine sounds like it would be terribly dangerous.”

James studied her, and his amber eyes seemed to search past her words to the emotion behind them. Her cheeks warmed at his intense gaze, and she glanced away.

Her father stepped toward the professor. “We have a few men at the *Daily Mail* who are very skilled and mechanically minded. They keep our presses working around the clock. Perhaps one of them could come down from London, take a look at your engine, and see if there’s anything he could do to help.”

James and the professor exchanged a quick glance, but it was impossible to tell what they thought of the idea.

“That’s kind of you to offer,” the professor said, “but we wouldn’t want to inconvenience any of your employees.”

“I’m sure one of them wouldn’t object to a day in the country and a chance to take a closer look at a flying machine.” Her father shifted his gaze from James to the professor. “Well, gentlemen, what do you say?”

The two exchanged another look, and James gave a slight nod.

Professor Steed’s smile returned. “Very well. We’d welcome a consultation with one of your men from London. He could come to our workshop and take a look at the engine there.”

“Good.” Her father nodded and shifted his gaze back to the airplane. “I’d be interested to learn more about your work, myself. If you’re agreeable, I’ll come with him.”

Bella’s heart leaped. How exciting! If her father was going to visit their workshop, perhaps she could go along.

“Of course.” The professor’s smile spread wider. “We’d be happy to show you our workshop and discuss the modifications we’ve made to the design of our airplane.”

“Excellent! I’ll send a message to our London office today.”

The professor extended his hand. “Thank you, Mr. Grayson. You’re most generous.”

Her father shook his hand. “There’s nothing I’d love more than seeing a British pilot cross the Channel first and take home that prize.”

“That would be outstanding.” The professor beamed. “So, you’ll let us know when to expect you and your man from London?”

“I’ll make the arrangements as soon as possible and send you a message.”

“Very good. Anytime would be fine with us,” the professor added.

Her father stretched out his hand toward James. The young pilot took hold and shook hands, but his expression remained guarded. The professor glanced toward the wagon and motioned his two young helpers forward.

Bella shot a glance at James and then her father. She had to say something now or she would miss her chance. “I’d like to visit your workshop, as well.”

James cocked his eyebrows. “You would?”

“Yes, I’m very interested in airplanes.”

“Nonsense, Bella!” Her father waved away her words. “Visiting an aviation

workshop is not something for a young lady. And even if it were, you shouldn't be inviting yourself along."

Bella's face heated. She wanted to argue her point, but challenging her father in front of these men they barely knew would only lead to more embarrassment.

"The young lady would be most welcome." The professor looked her way, genuine kindness shining in his eyes. "Mrs. Martha Shelby is a regular visitor to our workshop."

Her father's eyebrows dipped, and he shot Bella a quick glance. "We'll discuss this later. It's time we returned to the house." He turned toward James and the professor. "Thank you, gentlemen. I'll look forward to seeing you soon. Good day." He nodded to Mr. Fielding, and the two men started back across the field.

Bella followed her father, but after a few steps she slowed and looked over her shoulder. The two young lads lifted the broken wing from the dirt, while James and the professor pushed the airplane toward the wagon.

James glanced her way with a nod and half smile.

Her heart lifted, and she sent a smile back.

"Bella, come along," her father called.

Her gaze connected with James's once more, and then she turned and set off across the field. It might not be ladylike, and her father might not approve, but there had to be some way she could visit their workshop at Green Meadow Farm and see James Drake and his airplane again.



James pushed open the heavy wooden door and strode into the workshop. He tugged off his cap and gloves and tossed them on the workbench, then shrugged out of his jacket.

How could he have forgotten Charles Grayson was the owner of the *Daily Mail*—the very same man who was offering the prize to the first pilot who would fly across the English Channel? And what a prize—one thousand pounds! But it wasn't just the prize money that mattered. The prestige that would come from winning might help them secure a government contract to build airplanes for the British military. But he'd never win the prize or Charles





they had stayed at the workshop since their return from France last September. Seeing Wilbur Wright demonstrate his Wright Flyer had inspired them to continue their experiments and test flights in earnest. The announcement of the Channel-crossing prize two months later spurred them on, and they decided to stay at Green Meadow and work through the cold winter months. Wilbur Wright might have declined to attempt the Channel crossing, but they'd heard there were other pilots who were preparing to try for the prize. If James was going to beat them, they'd have to keep working at a steady pace.

James focused on the partially built second plane to his right, and new determination coursed through him. Now was the time for men to break free from the bounds of earth and fly unhindered. And he was resolved to rise in the ranks of those brave aviators who would find the answers and make powered flight safe and accessible to anyone who wanted to learn.

He'd never forget the thrill of his first flight. With the cool air rushing past his face and the vibration of the engine buzzing through him, he'd felt more alive than ever before.

The shed door slid open and Martha Shelby stepped into the workshop, carrying a large tray with two plates covered by cloth napkins. "How was the flight?" Her rosy cheeks creased with a warm smile as her blue eyes darted from James to the professor. She wore a red striped apron over her simple blue dress, and her silver hair was tied back and covered by a blue head scarf.

"Excellent!" The professor looked her way. "Though I'm afraid James had a bit of a rough landing when the engine died."

"Oh no! The engine died again?" She quickly scanned James. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Where did you land?"

"In the field across the road from the manor house."

Her eyebrows rose as she set the tray on the table. "I'm sure that must have caused a stir."

James gave a resigned nod. "You could say that."

"Not to worry." Professor Steed crossed toward Martha. "We met Mr. Grayson, the new master of Broadlands, his daughter, and their agent."

She grimaced. "Mr. Fielding?"

The professor nodded. “That’s the man. He was not very pleasant, but Mr. Grayson and his daughter seem to be aviation enthusiasts.”

“Is the airplane all right? I saw you tow it back with the wagon.”

“There are some minor damages.”

She lifted her gaze to the professor, her eyes lighting up. “I’m sure it’s nothing you can’t fix.”

The professor stared at her for a moment, then cleared his throat. “Yes . . . well, we will get right to that . . . but first I do believe I smell something delicious.”

Martha glanced down at the tray. “It’s just some steak and kidney pie and oat bread.”

The professor lifted his index finger. “I would never say *just* when describing any dish you prepared.”

Martha’s cheeks bloomed pink. She lifted the plates from the tray and set them on the table.

James crossed to the table and took a seat. Steam rose from the plates, carrying a savory scent and making his mouth water. “This looks delicious.”

The professor pulled out his chair, but he remained standing. “Thank you, Martha. It’s just what we need on a cold day like this.”

James glanced at Martha. “Why don’t you bring out a plate and join us?”

She stepped back. “No, I’ve plenty of work to do in the house. You two go ahead and eat your meal.”

“We’d enjoy your company,” the professor added.

She laughed softly. “I don’t know about that. After two bites, I expect you and James will be deep into a discussion about what changes you want to make to your airplane.”

The professor returned her smile. “I suppose you’re right, but still, we’d be glad to share a meal with you.”

She studied him for a moment, and then her expression softened with a smile. “I’ll be roasting a chicken for dinner tonight. Why don’t you come to the house at seven?”

The professor’s eyes widened for a second. Then he looked down and brushed his hand across the sleeve of his jacket. “I didn’t mean to invite myself to dinner.”

James tried not to smile, but it was hard to hold it back. Martha obviously had a growing affection for the professor, but he seemed unaware of it, or at least he pretended to be. “That’s kind of you to invite us, Martha,” James added. “We’d enjoy having dinner with you, wouldn’t we, Professor?”

The older man blinked a few times, then nodded. “Why yes, of course. That sounds splendid.”

Martha’s eyes brightened. “Seven o’clock, then?”

“Yes. We’ll be there.”

“All right. I’ll see you then.” She turned and sashayed out the door, carrying her tray.

James grinned as he watched her go. After the door slid shut, he looked across the table at the professor. “I believe Martha is sweet on you.”

“Bah! That’s nonsense. We’ve known each other since we were children.”

“All the more reason for her to have special feelings for an old friend.”

The professor sat in the chair opposite James and sent him a stern look. “Let’s pray.”

James smirked and lowered his head.

The professor clasped his hands. “Dear heavenly Father, we thank You for this meal and for the hands that have prepared it. Thank You for protecting James today, and we ask You to watch over us as we continue our experiments and test flights. You know how long we have labored and how much we’ve set our hearts on reaching our goal. We ask for Your grace and favor in the eyes of those who will help us toward a successful flight across the Channel. We thank You for all You have done for us and all You will do. In Jesus’s name, amen.”

The professor’s sincere prayer touched James in a way he hadn’t expected. He pulled in a slow deep breath and let it out. The professor was right. James could’ve been injured or killed today and his plane could’ve been destroyed, but he’d landed safely with only minor damages that could be repaired in a few days. Mr. Grayson could’ve been angry and insisted they leave Green Meadow. Instead, he’d asked to visit their workshop and wanted to bring along a man who might help them resolve their engine trouble.

It looked like the professor’s prayer was already being answered. Maybe it was time James focused on the grace he had already received rather than his present troubles or the stain of his past.



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