

It takes great strength to soar above it all....

FLYGIRL

Sherri L. Smith



"A dynamic,
heartfelt novel."

—*The Washington Post*



Chapter 1

It's Sunday afternoon, and the phonograph player is jumping like a clown in a parade the way Jolene and I are dancing. We're cleaning the Wilson house and Nat King Cole's singing on the record. It sounds fine. This is one of the best places to clean because they have a big yard and no neighbors close enough to hear our ruckus. Otherwise, working on a Sunday would be a real drag. But the Wilsons are gone for the weekend and Mr. Wilson said he'd pay extra for a clean house when he gets back. With Christmas just a few weeks away, the money will come in handy.

I am knee-deep in Murphy Oil Soap, washing Otis Wilson's sticky fingerprints off his mama's fine oak banister, when Jolene comes waltzing down the stairs with the laundry.

"I swear, these people must change their clothes every hour on the hour, every day. I've never seen such a mess of laundry in my life. Ida Mae Jones, hurry up with that polishing and come help me."

"I am hurrying. If they'd stop giving Otis jam for breakfast, I wouldn't be cleaning this railing every week."

"If they stopped giving Otis jam for breakfast, he'd cry for a week," she says.

Otis Wilson is the most spoiled white boy in New Orleans. Just a year younger than Jolene and me, but at seventeen, he's still a slobbering mess. Jolene says it's because he's soft in the head. I think it has more to do with being spoiled.

"You think he'd enlist if we ever join this war?"

Jolene laughs her big horse laugh. "Girl, can you see that little jam jar in a uniform? I mean he's big enough, for a white boy, and not bad looking, either, if you like the pasty type, but taking orders and holding a gun—we'd be better off surrendering than sending him to fight."

"Too true, too true." I laugh, thinking about Otis's broad-bellied self in a uniform. "Think they've got maids in the army to wipe the jam off his rifle?"

It's Jolene's turn to chuckle. "Now stop making me laugh and get to work. We're going to have to clean this house a hundred more times if you're going to get the money to go to Chicago."

"Don't I know it." I sigh. At home, we get by running our little berry farm, but getting by is far from getting rich. Even with cleaning houses full-time since Jolene and I graduated high school in June, the saving is coming slow. Sometimes it seems like my purse is nothing but a sieve with money running through it like water. "The way I see it, another month of solid work and I'll be set. Then all I have to do is find a way to get my mother to let me go to Chicago by myself."

"Or work another six months and take her with you."

"Oh, I can see that now," I say, rolling my eyes. "'Mama, you wait right here, I'm gonna go take my pilot's test.' She only lets me fly now because Grandy's with me. She hates to fly."

"Girl, I know better than to tell you to give it up. You've got the flying bug just as sure as your daddy did, but some days I think it's more trouble than it's worth. More money than it's worth, too."

"Bessie Coleman had to go all the way to France to learn

how to fly just because she was colored." She was one of my idols—the Negro Amelia Earhart. "She was nothing more than a hairdresser, but she did it. So why can't I? I already know how to fly, Jolene. If I can't get my license in Tuskegee, at least Chicago's closer than Paris."

Jolene shrugs over her armful of dirty shirts. "If you say so."

"I do."

Just remembering my first time in a plane, in my daddy's old Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny," I get goose bumps. Nothing else on God's green earth does that to me. Of course it's worth it.

Last year, just before I turned seventeen, Mama's daddy, Grandy, convinced her to let me go to Tuskegee to take my pilot's test. I'd taken over Daddy's side business of dusting crops, but I needed my license. Daddy would have taken me, had he lived. I'd already flown over forty hours with him, and I had passed the written exam by mail just before he died. All I needed to do was go up in a real plane with a certified instructor. Mama kept Daddy's promise by letting me go.

Grandy and I showed up real early at the airfield. I was so excited I thought I'd have to run to the restroom and pee every five minutes. Grandy was as calm as could be, though, and that helped me a lot. The instructor, a Mr. Anderson, showed up, and he was a white man, with blue eyes and a firm jawline. I'd heard he had passed other colored pilots at the base, and I thought he looked tough, but fair.

Well, I said a little prayer asking Daddy for help, and I took that instructor up in the test plane. It was a Jenny, like Daddy had taught me on, easy as slipping into an old sweater. We did rolls, and loops, and landings, and I could hardly stop smiling because I knew I'd done good.

All Ida Mae Jones wants to do is fly.

Ida's daddy was a pilot, and when he took her flying, she never wanted to come down again. But after his death, the sky is off-limits to a young black woman such as herself. When America enters World War II, the Army forms the WASP—Women Airforce Service Pilots—and Ida has a chance to join, if she's willing to use her light skin to pass as a white girl. She wants to fly more than anything, but Ida soon learns that denying one's identity and family is a heavy burden. Can she fulfill her dream without losing herself?

- ★ "This breakthrough title adds a new story to the shelves of World War II books. The details . . . are exciting, but tougher than any flight maneuver are Ida Mae's . . . feelings that culminate in an unforgettable climax."

—*Booklist*, starred review

★ ★ ★

"It was hard not to find myself cheering Ida Mae on. Hard not to get an itch to fly after reading this. Sherri Smith is a truly talented writer and *Flygirl* is a wonderful story."

—JACQUELINE WOODSON, three-time Newbery Honor-winning author

★ ★ ★

The Washington Post Best Kid's Books of the Year

