

TAKING FLIGHT

THE STORY OF BESSIE COLEMAN

Written by Elizabeth Gray

Illustrated by Simone Douglas



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FROM CLASSROOMS TO COTTON FIELDS

Under the blazing Texas sun, Bessie Coleman, her family, and many of the Black folks in town picked cotton. Their bodies ached as they carried the weight of heavy bags.



During cotton-picking season, people worked in the fields for months to harvest cotton. This included Bessie and her class from school.



“Why aren’t these children in school?” Bessie’s mother thought. Yet, she knew the answer: The more cotton picked, the more money made.

Bessie didn’t like the hard, hot work. She often went to the scales where the cotton was weighed because she was good with numbers.

At dusk, the Coleman family gathered to hear Bessie read. The stories she read wrapped blankets of hope around them and gave Bessie the vision to see beyond what was around her.



OFF TO CHICAGO

In 1915, 23-year-old Bessie moved to Chicago to live with her brothers. Bessie learned the city's rhythms from the barbershop window. She was called the “best and fastest manicurist in town.” However, Bessie wanted more.



Bessie wanted to fly! She applied to American flight schools but was denied because she was a Black woman. Still, her brother's words hummed through the engine of her mind: *Women fly in France*. She'd have to raise money and learn French, but Black women had more opportunities in France.





SETTING SAIL TO TAKE FLIGHT

On November 20, 1920, Bessie set sail on an ocean liner headed for France. Soon after her arrival, she joined the top aviation school. Each day, Bessie walked nine miles from her apartment to the airfield.

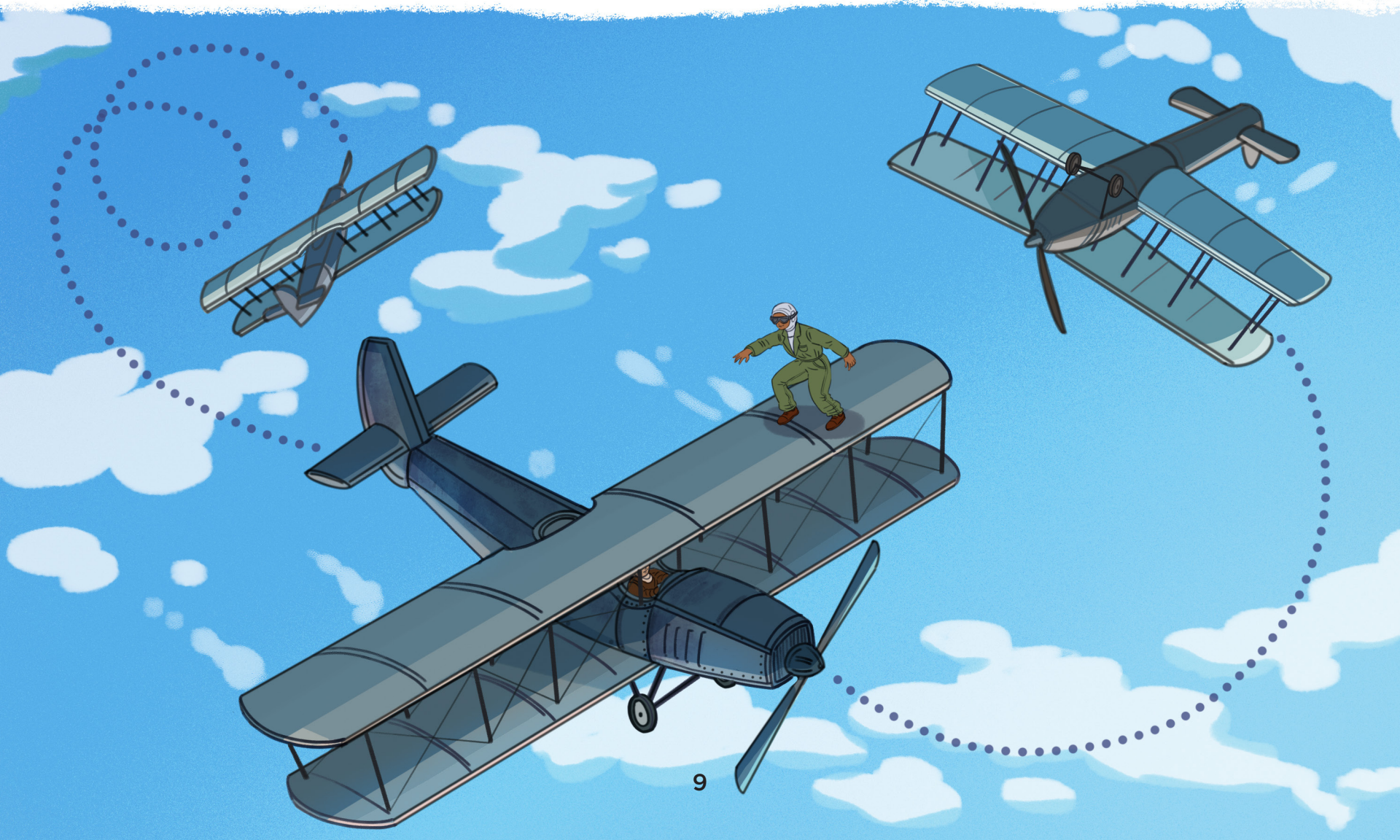
The first airplanes were not always safe, and Bessie heard about plane crashes. This frightened her, but she was determined to take flight.





Winds roared over the voice of Bessie's instructor, and engine oil splashed Bessie's goggles. Each lesson was risky, but in the sky, Bessie felt most alive! On June 15, 1921, Bessie became the first Black woman to earn an international pilot's license.

Bessie performed figure eights and jaw-dropping loop-the-loops. As her co-pilot steered the plane, a daring Bessie walked its wings! She was ready to soar to even greater heights and bring others with her.





FLIGHT SCHOOL DREAMS

Bessie's popularity soared as she performed during flight shows. Headlines read "The First of Her Race" to celebrate that she was the first Black woman to fly.



In February 1923, a crowd gathered to watch Bessie fly her own plane. It was old and used, but it was hers. “This is a step toward opening up a flight school,” she thought. She wanted a place in the United States where other Black people could become pilots. During the flight, the engine suddenly stopped, and the plane whistled as it tumbled. This wasn’t a stunt; this was a disaster!

Bessie's body was bruised and some of her bones were broken, but she was determined to take the pilot's seat again.

"As soon as I can walk, I'm going to fly!" she promised.



Bessie recovered but felt the sting of losing her plane. In 1925, Bessie became an orator, inspiring others with her words. She often spoke to children at schools and to groups of adults.

“No one owns the sky,” she declared as audiences listened in amazement.



FINAL FLIGHT

On April 30, 1926, Bessie rode as a passenger during a test flight. She was preparing for a show to raise money for her flight school. A loose wrench got stuck in the engine, and the pilot lost control of the plane. Tragically, Bessie and the pilot died in the accident.





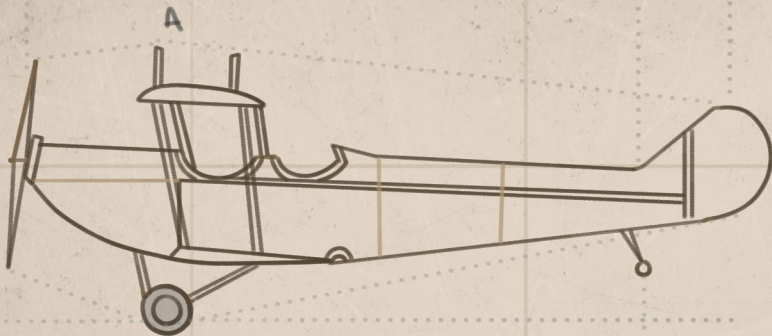
Thousands of people gathered at Bessie's funeral. Her life and words had given people hope and broadened their minds.

Although Bessie never opened a flight school, she inspired many people to take flight. A pilot named William Powell opened the Bessie Coleman Flying School where Black men and women learned to fly.

In 1992, Mae Jemison—the first Black female astronaut—carried a photograph of Bessie with her into space. Bessie's example helped Mae fly higher than Bessie could have imagined.



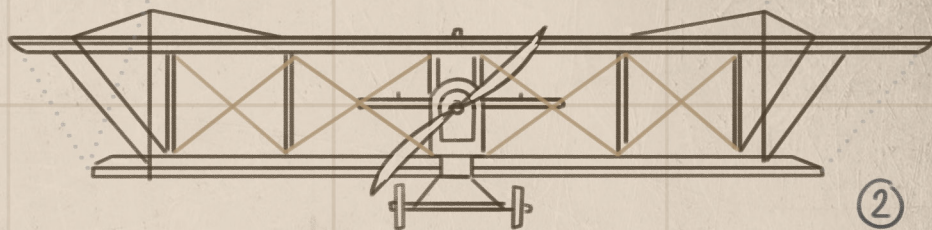
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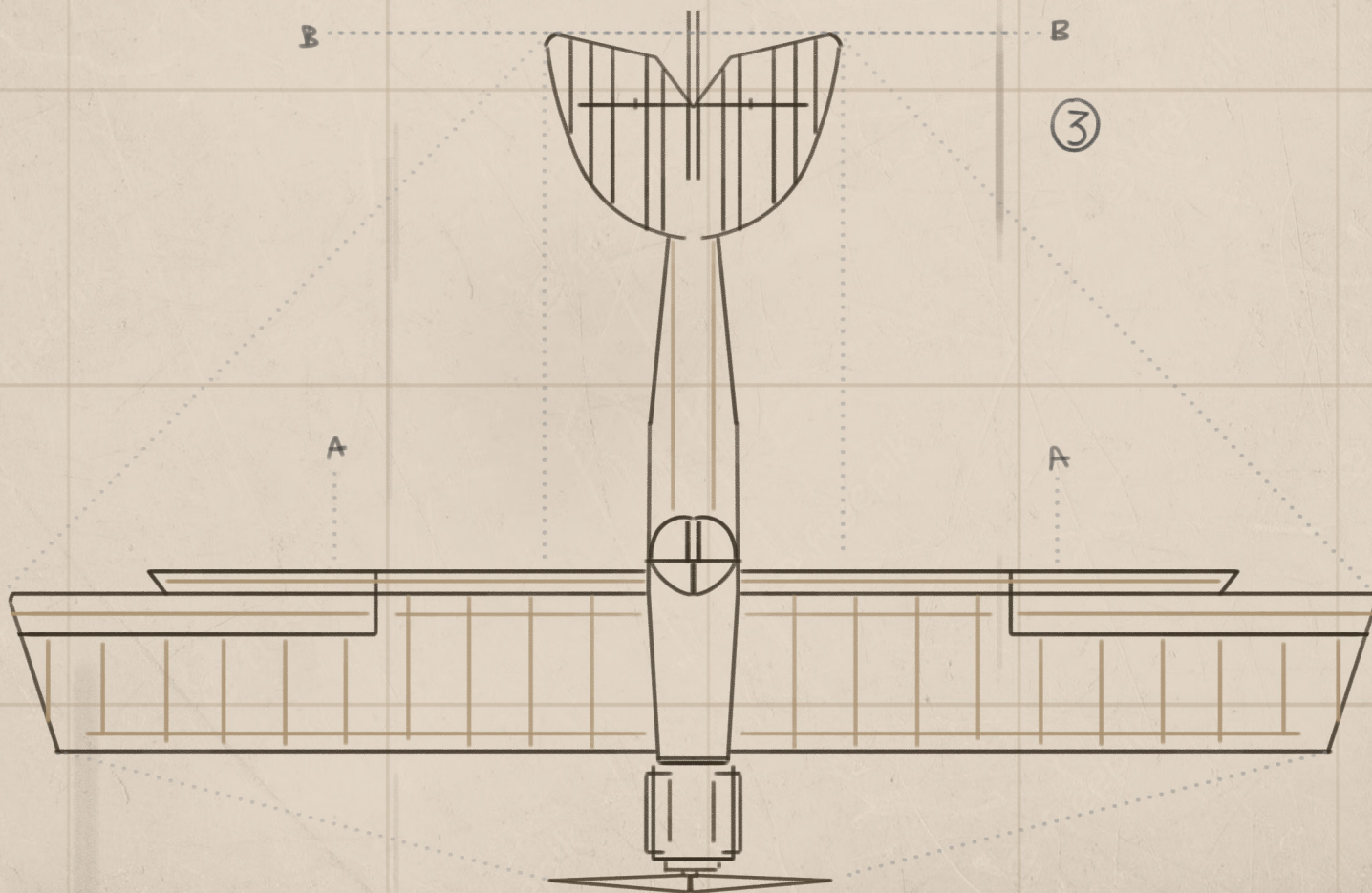


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ELIZABETH GRAY is the author of *Taking Flight: The Story of Bessie Coleman*. She and her husband live outside of Washington, D.C. They are both writers, dreamers, and creators. Together they have 1 child, 14 nieces, 4 nephews, 8 godchildren, and over 500 students they hold near to their hearts. Each book she writes is a seed of inspiration she hopes to plant.



SIMONE DOUGLAS is a freelance Illustrator born and raised in London. She enjoys bringing stories to life both fiction and historical. When she's not behind her desk, you can find her out in the garden or playing games.

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ISBN: 978-1-4256-1412-6

