

RANGER *in* **TIME**

Long Road to Freedom



KATE MESSNER

illustrated by
KELLEY MCMORRIS

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Summary: This time the mysterious box that Ranger the golden retriever found transports him to a Maryland plantation before the Civil War, where he must help a young house slave named Sarah and her younger brother, Jesse, find their way to the Underground Railroad and north to freedom, before Jesse is sold to a plantation further south.

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Chapter 1



LAST CHANCE TO GO

Sarah hurried into the dining room with Master Bradley's breakfast, a plate piled with corn bread and cold ham. She set it on the table before him and stepped back against the wall to listen. All morning, the house had been full of buzz and chatter. That was never good.

The Bradleys had sold a dozen slaves this year because they'd switched from growing tobacco to mostly wheat on their tidewater Maryland plantation. Wheat wasn't as much work, so fewer slaves were needed. Simon and Moses and Henry — men Sarah had known

her whole life — had already been sold south to work on a cotton plantation in Alabama.

“I can’t imagine you’ll get much for the boy. He’s not strong enough.” Mrs. Bradley set down her teacup and frowned at her husband.

Sarah’s heart jumped into her throat. Were they talking about her brother, Jesse? There were other boys on the plantation, but Jesse was the youngest and smallest.

“Mr. Fenn will decide if he has value. We cannot afford to keep more than we need.” Master Bradley wiped his mustache with his napkin and turned to Sarah. “Go up to the roof and watch for Mr. Fenn’s boat. Come tell me when you see him approaching.”

Sarah forced her voice to sound bored, as if she hadn’t been paying attention to their conversation. “Yes, sir.” She curtsied and hurried up to the third floor. She climbed the wooden

ladder, unlatched the trapdoor, and pushed it open. A warm wind blew in off the creek.

Sarah climbed out onto the rooftop porch and looked over the fields to the water. All she saw was a fishing skiff and a bigger boat docked by the tobacco prize house. Old Isaac would be at the prizer now, using the machine to pack dried tobacco into hogsheads, getting ready to load the barrels onto the boat.

There was no sign of Mr. Fenn's schooner, which meant there was time to think. Time to learn more.

Sarah raced down the stairs and out the back door to the yew tree near the formal garden. William Bradley sat leaning against it with a book.

Sarah and William had been born the same week in April, twelve years ago. They'd played together as babies while Mama tended Mrs.

Bradley's kitchen garden. Both their mothers had gotten sick with fever three years ago. But only Mrs. Bradley had recovered.

Sarah was sad and quiet for a long time after her mama died. William tried to cheer her up with stories. He'd meet her after breakfast to share books from his tutor. One day, he started teaching her letters, and then words. Most slaves couldn't read, but the Bradleys didn't seem to mind if Sarah learned. She could read almost anything now.

But today, she had no interest in books. "Who's your father selling?"

William shrugged. "I don't know. But not you. That much is certain. You're my favorite."

"What about Jesse?"

"Father would never sell your brother," William said. But he looked away when he said it. Mama always said eyes told the truth even when mouths were lying.

But Sarah nodded. William had to think she believed him. “Thank you.”

William held up the book. “I brought Dickens for us.”

Stories by the British author Charles Dickens were Sarah’s favorite. But today, her mind was on other things. “I can’t stay. I must go watch for Mr. Fenn’s boat.”

On the way back to the house, something in the grass caught Sarah’s eye. A dagger-shaped hawk feather, striped brown and white. Mama had always loved the hawks that soared above the fields. Sarah picked up the feather and tucked it into her pocket.

When she went inside and climbed back up to the roof, a schooner was rounding the bend from the Sassafras River. Mr. Fenn was on his way to buy slaves.

Sarah knew what happened to slaves who were sold south. She’d seen them chained in

a line for the long journey to Alabama or Louisiana, where they'd be worked almost to death in the cotton fields.

Jesse was too small for that, and too spirited. He'd already seen more than his share of beatings for sassing the overseer.

Sarah looked up and blinked away tears. "What should I do, Mama?" she whispered. Mama's body was buried back by the sycamores, but Sarah figured her spirit was up in that bluebird sky. Right then, a hawk soared over the trees. It circled long and slow over the tobacco field.

Sarah sucked in her breath. She pulled the feather from her pocket.

When slaves whispered about freedom, Mama used to tell Sarah not to listen. Sarah's pa had run away a long time ago, when she and Jesse were small. His plan had been to escape north and then work to buy his family's



freedom. Mama promised he'd come back for them. So even when there was talk of a house nearby in Odessa, Delaware, where folks might help runaways, Mama said it was safer to stay and wait.

But Pa hadn't come. Sometimes, Sarah wondered if he'd ever made it to freedom.

Maybe this feather was a sign. The world was changing. When Mama was alive, it looked as though they'd all be together at the Bradley plantation forever. But with the shift from tobacco to wheat and many more slaves being sold south, there was no promise of that. Maybe Mama was telling her things had to be different now.

The schooner's sail flapped in the wind. It was coming.

Sarah looked up at the hawk. It circled once more, then soared over the trees toward the river.

Sarah tucked the feather into her pocket and stumbled down the ladder. She ran to the slave quarters, plunged her hand into a straw mattress, and pulled out the cloth sack that held Mama's vegetable money. She'd earned it by selling extra green beans and potatoes she grew in their small garden by the slave quarters. It wasn't much, but it was all Mama had left them.

Next, Sarah crept into the plantation's empty kitchen. She filled a burlap sack with dried beef and bread, a small jug of water, and a sharp knife.

Then she raced for the stables and burst in the door. "Jesse!"

Old Mabel whinnied. Jesse startled so much he dropped the brush he'd been using to groom her. "What is it?"

"Come with me!" Sarah grabbed Jesse's hand and fled for the prize house by the water.

Jesse's old brown hat flew off as they raced by the kitchen. He tried to stop, but Sarah tugged his arm and kept running.

“Leave it! We have to go!”

It was her only chance to save him.