

Sweet Clara AND THE Freedom Quilt

by DEBORAH HOPKINSON
paintings by JAMES RANSOME



BEFORE I WAS EVEN TWELVE YEARS OLD, I got sent from North Farm to Home Plantation 'cause they needed another field hand. When I got there, I cried so much they thought I was never gon' eat or drink again. I didn't want to leave my momma.

"I'm goin' back to her," I whispered every day to Young Jack, who worked beside me in the fields.

"Well, you better start eatin' all you can, Sweet Clara." He smiled at me. But then his smile was gone. In a low voice he say, "Or else you won't make it."

Young Jack helped me believe I'd get back to my momma someday. Truth was, I'd be lost before I got through the fields, them being so big and all. But I didn't give up dreamin'.



Aunt Rachel was raising me now. She wasn't my for-real blood aunt, but she did her best to care for me.

One night she come back from working in the Big House and found me lying dead tired on our cabin floor. She shook her head and say, "Sweet Clara, you aine gon' last in the fields. But I got an idea."

Aunt Rachel's idea was sewin' — and she started teachin' me the very next night. It wasn't easy for me to learn, my hands already rough and clumsy from hoeing and weeding the fields. So Aunt Rachel took it real slow.

She brought scraps of cloth from the Big House and taught me 'bout each one, how it was special and had to be treated in its own way. I liked to piece the scraps together to make pretty patterns of colors. But Aunt Rachel didn't care much about pretty patterns.

"Now you rip out that whole row and do it again, Clara," she say.

"Why I got to make the stitches so tiny?" I complained.

"You gon' be a real *seamstress*, that's why."

Clara, a slave and seamstress on Home Plantation, knows that the Underground Railroad can lead her to freedom. The only problem is, How to find it? By piecing together scraps of cloth with scraps of information gathered from the other slaves, she fashions a map so secret that even the master won't suspect...



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Ransome's paintings here are among his finest."
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)



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