

True North by Mark Alan Leslie

Chapter One

The Year of Our Lord 1860

Tice stood at the riverbank, spring runoff flowing swiftly past him. Certain death lay ahead. Certain torture lay behind. First, he couldn't swim. And torture? That's what they did with slaves who tried to escape.

Struggling to catch his breath, he thought, Lord, how'd Your boy get here? What on earth I done?

Like flipping the pages through a fast-moving picture book, the last hour or so of his life spun before his eyes. The day had begun so quietly, so drearily, like always.

There he was, maybe nineteen, twenty years old, standing with hoe in hand in his Massah's field, reflecting on his short life. This day like all the others. Still hackin' away in the dirt, still pickin' cotton, still sleepin' on a board.

He swung the hoe and joined in singing with the other slaves:

"Swing low, sweet chariot—"

Tice stood working in the cotton field, hoe in hand, singing with his fellow slaves, the words of the spiritual distracting him from the monotony of the chore that would consume his day. Singing helped. Sometimes the less you had on your mind, the better. Sometimes when you're not thinking of your Momma—God bless her soul—or your Pappy—*I hope you're still alive!*—the quicker the day goes. But today was different.

Here he was, maybe nineteen, twenty years old, standing with hoe in hand in his Massah's field, reflecting on his short life. This day like all the others. Still hackin' away in the dirt, still pickin' cotton, still sleepin' on a board.

“Comin’ for to carry me home—”

Tice’s arms were swinging the hoe, his mouth was forming the words. But lately, his mind was on his Pappy and the freedom his father had whispered about to him a few summers ago, before being sold by Massah. Pappy had remembered that freedom with happiness.

“I looked o’er Jordan ’n what did I see—”

Tice continued working and singing, making his way across the field with the others under Massah’s watchful eye. He had to keep up, do his share, or Massah would whip him, sure.

Just then, Massah gave a random crack of his whip, a frightening reminder of what he did to those who displeased him.

Tice struggled not to look toward the edge of the field, to the road where he’d met a stranger not two weeks prior.

The man had seemed to appear from nowhere, leaned down from his horse toward Tice and said quietly, “Young man, if you can ever escape, do so by crossing the Ohio River just south of the ferry and ask for the Randolph house. That’s my place. Do that and we’ll get you free. Remember that? Randolph?”

“A band o’ angels comin’ after me—”

Tice had nodded. *Randoaf*. He thought of another slave, a skinny old man the women called a “randy oaf.”

He didn’t know what that meant, but, as the man hurried off, Tice repeated, “Randoaf.”

Since then, Tice had worked as usual. But the thought of escape stayed in the forefront of his mind, the taste of Pappy’s freedom inhabiting his dreams at night.

“Comin’ for to carry me home.”

Tice blinked hard twice, shook his head and nearly lost his grip on the hoe as he scolded himself. *Freedom ’n such is fool thinkin’*.

Suddenly, the whip smacked the ground by his feet and an icy hand laid firmly on Tice’s bare shoulder. It sent a chill down his spine and cut the hymn short in his throat. His friends all around him in the cotton field took notice and stopped singing as well.

Clutching the neck of the hoe in his hands, as if to drain the life out of the wood, Tice turned an eye toward the firm grip and knew from the white, square-fingered hand whose it was.

“Yes-sir, Boss,” Tice said, turning toward the man who owned

him and another hundred slaves who toiled the fields as well as the plantation that spread for a mile in any direction. Tice dare not look his boss in the eye, so he focused on the man's chin.

"You're one of my strongest workers, Tice," Julius Lykins said, "so I need you to go down to the village, to the railroad station."

"Yes-sir, Massah Lykins."

"A shipment's arriving on the train. Morgan'll be down there, along with Gilly, waiting with a wagon. You get down there and help them unload."

Tice nodded.

"The shipment should arrive about the time you get there if you head out now. If you don't get there in time, you'll get the sting of this whip, boy." Lykins pushed his horse whip in front of Tice's eyes.

Tice cringed. He'd felt that sting before and had the welts across his back to prove it.

"Well, get on down there, boy. I expect you, Morgan and Gilly back here in an hour or so."

Tice handed his hoe to Elijah, his friend standing nearby, and started to quick-step out of the field toward the road to town.

"Clock's ticking, boy," his master said.

Tice started jogging.

"Tick tock!"

Tice set out in a full run, his hardened bare feet unaffected by the hard-packed dirt as he reached the road to the quiet Kentucky town of Maysville.

"Gotta get there or feel the whip. Gotta get there or feel the whip," Tice repeated to himself. As he ran, his brief life flashed across his mind. He was born on this plantation and knew nothing else. His Momma died of fever when he was a boy. A few years later his Pappy was sold to another plantation who knows where. He had no brothers or sisters, except brothers and sisters in the Lord.

An' here I is, still livin' for nothin'—'cept my relationship with my Lord. Here I is, runnin' into town for my Massah, goin' to load my Massah's stuff for my Massah's plantation, for my Massah's farm animals maybe, or my Misses's parlah.

The hymn lingered in his mind.

"If you get there before I do—"

Someday he'd have a manshun, he thought, a big old house in the sky. But until then, he was hoein' 'n pickin' 'n runnin' 'n loadin' here on earth for a man who beat him 'n his friends for fool reasons, or no fool reason t'all.

Tice was a speedy runner when need be and soon he looked up to see the rail station ahead. Sure enough, he could see the steam from the engine floating skyward, drifting side to side—same as he'd like to do. He began to sprint, not wanting Morgan, his Massah's foreman, to get upset with him. Morgan packed a more powerful whip than his Massah when his Massah wasn't watching.

"Comin' for to carry me home—"

Shortly Tice reached the train and saw Morgan talking to a man wearing a funny-looking hat. Gilly, another slave, stood behind Morgan. The man motioned to another fellow, who reached up and tugged at a rope on a door on the train, then slid the door open. Tice ran to Morgan's side and lowered his eyes to Morgan's chin.

"Let's get to it, boy," Morgan said. A burly man, Morgan twisted his handlebar mustache with a forefinger and thumb. "Hop up there and hand down the boxes to Gilly. He'll pass 'em to me and I'll load 'em up on the wagon."

"Yes-sir."

Tice sprang onto the train. Box upon box filled the rail car. What was in the boxes, he didn't know at first. Soon he discovered, though, from the sheer weight of them, that the cargo was dishes, plates, pots and pans and such items for the mansion. *This'll mean the manshun's old pots and pans for us-uns, maybe.*

In short order, Tice passed the last box to Gilly, a big fellow slave Tice hardly knew—indeed, nobody hardly knew 'cause he hardly spoke. A grunt here and a grunt there defined Gilly.

Loading the boxes onto the wagon and then strapping them down with rope, Morgan turned to Tice. "Gilly'll ride with me. No room for three. You'll hafta walk, boy. But don't ya' be dallyin'."

Tice liked that idea. He'd step along the side of the road where it was grassy and cooler under the shadow of the trees. He began the walk back and watched the wagon disappear ahead of him. As he stepped one foot in front of the other, a thought began to ferment in his mind. An exciting idea. An educated person who knew about

epiphanies might call it one of those.

He looked up. Morgan and Gilly had disappeared over a rise in the road. Tice stopped in his tracks and repeated to himself, “Randoaf.”

He glanced around him. Was anybody watching? Maybe the workers at the train station? No. Anyone ridin’ or walkin’ down the road? No.

“Tell all my friends I’m comin’ too—”

Quickly, he set his feet to motion toward the plantation. Then, a hundred yards up the road, looking again to make sure no one was watching, Tice veered into the woods, eastward toward the Ohio River.

Pushing branches out of his face, Tice plowed through a woodland. “South of the ferry. Randoaf.” His destination was etched in his mind. He knew the river. He knew where the ferry left Maysville and floated over to Ripley, Ohio, north of the Mason-Dixon Line, separating slave states from free states.

“Comin’ for to carry me home.”

As he hustled towards the land of freedom, doubts about that very liberty filled his mind. Sure, he’d be free. But where would he sleep? What would he eat? What work would he do—*could* he do? Who would be responsible for all this—all of him? First his Momma, then his Pappy and always—yes, always—Lykins saw to it that his hunger, thirst and shelter were taken care of. Now Momma was gone, Pappy was gone and he was leavin’ Lykins.

Oh, Massah. Tice thought of more than one whipping at the hands of Lykins. At that memory, he hastened his steps, remembering Lykins saying he expected Tice back to the plantation soon. *When I doesn’t arrive, Massah’ll be furious ’n he’ll come lookin’ for me, and he’ll have that whip in his hand. Oh, that whip!*

Several minutes later, he pushed another branch out of his face and came to a meadow. Nothing planted here. No cotton. No tobacco. Tice hesitated and looked around slowly, wanting to make sure no one would spot him if he made a mad dash across the field.

“South of the ferry. Randoaf,” he muttered aloud as he sprang into the meadow at a speed that even surprised him. “South of the ferry. Randoaf.”

Hay in the field tickled his ankles, but his focus remained on the river. Just then he heard a loud voice hollering, “Hey, you!”

It was a white man’s voice. “You there!”

He pretended not to hear the man and continued to run.

“Stop your runnin’, boy!”

Stop? Could he stop now? Doubts flooded in again.

He hesitated. Yes, he could stop. Maybe that would keep him out of trouble. Maybe the man wouldn’t tell his Massah. Then he wouldn’t have to worry about food on the table, a roof over his head, chores to do. No. No worries. He slowed down but didn’t look in the direction of the voice.

What should he do? What would Pappy do? he asked himself.

Then again he remembered his Pappy talking to him about being free until neighboring tribesmen raided his village, tied them up, then sold the whole village to a white man on a boat. Tice remembered the smile on his Pappy’s face when he talked about being a free man, and he speeded up his pace again.

“Comin’ for to carry me—”

“Stop or I’ll shoot!”

Chills went down Tice’s back. His knees almost buckled. Shoot? The man had a rifle? *Well, maybe dyin’ wouldn’t be bad, neither, Lord—compared to hoein’ someone else’s fields for the rest of my life.* He hurried on as fast as he could and finally reached the end of the pasture. No lead bullet was fired, only a missile of fear.

Tice dove into the forest, landing on the ground and rolling into a bramble bush. “Ouch!” he screamed, looking down in pain as blood began to leak out of his right arm. He gingerly pulled his arm away from the bush and touched his forearm. “Ow!”

He heard the man call to someone else, “Hurry up and tell Mister Lykins that I think one of his slaves is runnin’ away toward the river! I’m chasin’ after him!”

“Chasin’ after him,” Tice repeated. Oh, no. Hurry, he told himself. South of the ferry. Randoaf.

He pushed himself off the ground to his feet, got his bearings and ran off. How long could he go? How long had it been? Was Lykins missing him already? If not, that man was going to tell him. Fear rippled through him like tendrils of ice as Tice thought of the

consequences of being caught.

“Dear Momma,” he called out. “Dear Pappy. Save me.”

“Dear Lord!” he said louder as he came to a hillock, “Where’s my band o’ angels?” He looked up and the top of the hillock appeared a mile away even though it was only probably fifty yards. “Oh, Lord, help me!”

Tice clambered up the mound. Was this the Blue Ridge Mountains? he wondered. He’d heard stories and thought they were far beyond the river. Was his mind workin’ okay?

Just when his legs gave out, he reached the top of the hill. Falling to the ground, he looked up and saw the river in the distance. He took a few seconds to rest and draw his breath, knowing he couldn’t wait long; the man was chasing after him. The man! Tice turned to look behind him. The man was nearing the base of the hillock!

“Stop right there!” The man scowled and pointed a finger at Tice. “Stop there and it may spare you a beatin’!”

Tice shook his head. He knew that weren’t true. *Not true t’all. I’s long past bein’ spared no beatin’. A beatin’s a comin’. A bad beatin’—if’n I gets caught. If’n.*

The thought of the whip spurred him on, giving him a second wind, and he hustled down the hill, ducking away from alder branches along the way. He reached the bottom and skirted around another bramble bush. *Gotta get distance. Gotta get distance ’tween me ’n him. A long way.* He didn’t see that the man had a rifle, but maybe he did.

Suddenly he splashed through a brook, his toes hit a rock and he fell to the bank of the brook, screaming in pain. He grabbed for his big toe. Had he broken it? He sat up and held his foot. Blood seeped out of his big and second toes. He put his foot back in the water, hoping the coolness would help numb it.

But he couldn’t wait, couldn’t linger a second longer. The man must be nearing the top of the hill by now and might spot him. His Pappy’s face flashed before him. “*Git ov’r it, son. Buck up! Git up and run!*”

“Yes, Pappy,” Tice said aloud. He lifted himself out of the water, stepped up to dry ground and set out running again as fast as he could while trying not to touch ground with those two injured toes.

And here he was, several minutes later, wheezing for breath, a sharp pain in his ribs, standing at the riverbank, fixated on the spring runoff streaking past in a maniacal race downstream. Yep. The choice: certain death or certain torture. Here was his future, or the end of it. Try to swim the river, he'd drown. Stay behind, he'd get whipped half to death, or maybe even all the way to death.

Struggling to catch his breath, Tice said aloud, "Dear Pappy, save me!"