

“The Extraction of Liberty”

Venture Jones slogged along the river road, the weathered split-rail fence on his right, with his withered old dog Wiley trotting miserably along beside him. All during the walk back from town he was so consumed by an inner fury that he was almost unaware of the troubled weather around him. A cold wild wind whipped through and around the swirling charcoal gray clouds over head, and the starkly bare tree-trunks framing the colorless landscape in between. In this turbulent moment his soul concentrated his energy so that it almost self-combusted, like kindling set ablaze by the focused rays of light through a magnifying glass. Bitter thoughts of his youth came to mind, so long ago in time and space in Africa, in Old Calabar on coastal West Africa. Venture recalled that, although despised today, he had been born a prince among his people, rich from the sale of black slaves to the white man.

Finally arriving at the mouth of the lane leading up to his well-made two-story gray brick home, a he looked over the land he owned and farmed; a substantial number of acres planted in cotton. Venture also owned twenty African and African-American slaves who labored for him in the fields and around the farm just outside of the misnamed town of Liberty, in south central Mississippi. As a land and slave-owning black man, with money in the bank, needless to say he was an anomaly in the area. Venture trudged up the damp lane pushing further into the mud the decayed leaves of autumn, ascended the few stone steps to the porch, and bumped open the red front door with a burly shoulder. Wiley bustled inside through his legs. Venture turned and closed the door, took off his overcoat, gloves and hat, leaving them on the hooks on the wall beside the door. Then muddy boots came off on the mat beside the entrance, followed by the wet socks.

His house woman, Essie, came slowly out of the kitchen, drying her hands on her apron. Venture turned to look at her. Essie was a light-skinned mulatto of about twenty years old and pretty, even with her hair

tied up in a white clothe. He started to smile, then thought better of it. Reality was that she hated him: in part because her former master had sold her to him away from her husband and three year old daughter. Her anguished tears had meant nothing to him. This was just a business transaction in property, not people. She was also forced to bear the burden of being the vessel for the exercise of his sexual needs. Essie was pregnant and had told him. Venture was not pleased; children had to be raised to eleven years old before they had good value as assets on the slave-market. Up til' then, they were all cost.

"Fix me some hot tea, Essie," he drawled.

"Alright," she said. "Dinner be ready soon," and turned back into the kitchen.

Venture didn't get where he was—in the slave business, enslaved himself before buying himself free—by indulging sentimentality. The softer feelings had long ago burned off leaving him a fire hardened stump of a man. Just then, as it turned darker outside, there came a knock on his door.

Too tired to be surprised, he trudged the few steps to the door, grabbed the handle, pressed down the latch and pulled it open. He could not make out the face of the shadowy form on the porch. There was a man there but he could not make out who it was.

"Who is it come to my house on a night even the devil himself would stay in?" he asked.

A figure stepped forward into the yellow candle-light emanating from the interior of the house but did not utter a word.

Venture sucked in his breath and stared; his gaze hardened as he recognized Reed Jackson, the tall sinewy white man who had spit in his face and called him a nigger earlier in town that day. They were not strangers, and that was not the first time that Venture had been forced to bear the insults of a man less well off than he but possessing the trump card of a white skin. Venture's sin was that he had

breached southern etiquette: he had not stepped from the sidewalk into the muddy street and doffed his hat while the white man passed.

At first neither spoke. Then Venture noticed another figure on the porch with Reed, and a second younger white man stepped forward. He was Reed's son, Isaiah, a good looking youth with a long brown drooping mustache and soft brown eyes.

"Well, I was mistaken: the devil is out and about tonight," Venture managed to croak out before his bile rose and closed off his throat.

"I won't test you by asking entry to your home," Reed said, "But I do have a word to say."

Venture still could not bring himself to speak again.

"Well then," Reed said balancing his weight on both legs, "Here it is: I need to ask a favor of you, since despite everything, you are the one person who could help me, if you choose to do so."

At first, Venture could not believe what he was hearing. Then he looked questioningly at Isaiah, then back to Reed before finally managing to reply,

"What in the world could be the reason the two of you followed me home from Liberty on a night like this after you spit in my face this afternoon?"

"I had to do that else other white men would wonder at my weakness," Reed said, drawing himself up and looking the black man in the eye.

Venture was just about to explode with a stream of rougher words when he noticed that Isaiah's brown eyes were focused past his shoulder on a point inside the house. He turned to look over his right shoulder and saw Essie standing again just outside the kitchen entrance, looking at the young white

man. When she saw Venture looking at her, she quickly turned and padded back through the doorway. Obviously embarrassed, Isaiah's face reddened and he refocused his gaze on Venture.

Venture thought: now what the fuck is goin on here?

Reed spoke again, "Look, I have suffered a number of business reverses and I need a short term loan to pay off my creditors until I receive some imported goods, the sale of which will allow me to repay you. My creditors are unwilling to wait for my receipt of these goods, knowing that times have been extremely hard on me of late."

Venture sneered, "So I am a nigger to you but I am also the last man standing, the only person with money but, ah, why should I lend it to you, that is the part I don't get?"

"I will repay you the principal in short order with an above average rate of interest to boot," Reed said.

"Well, suppose I don't want your money?" Venture replied. "Suppose I would appear weak if I loaned you cash after you humiliated me today?"

"Are you so well set up that you can't use more?" Reed asked evenly.

Venture did not reply immediately, but mentally taking a step back he quietly looked his nemesis in the eye. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, he heard himself saying,

"I will accept your terms if you will accept mine. If you do not pay me, interest included, within the specified time period, I will be allowed to take a pound of your flesh, from the breast nearest your heart as the penalty for your default."

Both white men stared dumbstruck at him.

"Those are my terms; take 'um or leave 'um."

“That is an excessively harsh and cruel penalty to seek to inflict on anyone, no matter the provocation,”
Isaiah said softly.

Venture looked at Reed and folded his arms across his chest but said nothing.

Reed looked down at the porch as if expecting it to extend some mercy to him. Hearing nothing, he
looked up and said,

“When can we meet at the lawyer in town to draw up the contract? I need the money now.”

Isaiah heatedly spoke to his father, “Surely you can’t accept this deal. It is cruel and dangerous: this
penalty could cost your life!”

“I will meet you at the lawyer’s at 10am tomorrow morning,” Reed said.

With that he turned to his son and said, “Come on boy, let’s go.”

Both men departed the porch into the darkness.

As Venture turned to enter his house he thought that sometimes business was more than just business.
He closed the red door behind him.

The next morning Reed and Isaiah came into Liberty early. It was a small town of about 500 people, the
economy dependent primarily on cotton, with a few services and trades spun off of that. Isaiah split off
from his father, encountering a group of his young friends who had been out carousing all night. Two of
them, William and Joseph Mayes, left their group and took Isaiah by the arm into Beekman’s Café,
where they sat down at a table in the back and ordered some coffee.

“You still crazy?” William asked.

“What do you think?” Isaiah replied.

“Are you both still committed to helping me out?”

“Let’s see,” Joseph said. “You want us to help you run off with Essie to New Orleans on one of those river steamers, where you plan to marry her, forget about Liberty, and your friends and family. She is light enough to pass as part Indian but—“

“She can pass as white or anything else in a wild city like New Orleans,” Isaiah interjected. “There’s mixtures of people down there who even god couldn’t have dreamed up. We love each other and we don’t care about white or black, rich or poor. She has to get out of Venture’s house. That man doesn’t have any human feelings at all. Now Essie is going to give birth; she has him convinced that it is his but it isn’t, it’s mine. If he finds out it will go hard on her. He doesn’t love her, of course, but the truth would damage his pride. Tomorrow night I will be waiting for her as she sneaks out of the house. With your help we will be able to get to the big river and onto a steamer.”

“Alright,” Joseph said. William nodded his head in agreement. They finished their coffee and left.

Several doors down Liberty’s muddy main street from Beekman’s was the tiny law office of William J. Bryant. Most of his work came in resolving court fines levied on the liquored up participants in some bar fight. That’s as close as Liberty came to experiencing a felony. But his notary work paid, as well. Bryant made a small living from his business but was additionally compensated by not having to endure any competition. He was self-taught in the law, so to speak, and the diplomas on the wall behind his scuffed brown desk were of his own creation. A weathered set of law books rested on dust covered shelves running along three walls; at times, in seeking to impress an actual or prospective client, he would sometimes rise from his ancient chair with a great heaving and squeezing of flesh, and walk over to a shelf, the bent floorboards meanwhile groaning their outrage, then thoughtfully peruse the titles before picking out a volume at random—most folks in Liberty were illiterate anyway—to *consult*. Otherwise his desk and much of what was left of the floor space were littered with stacks of yellowed papers. The lone

occupant of his desk drawers was a bottle of Red-eye Kentucky Bourbon, to help pass the time when things got boring. Bryant was easily bored.

This morning at 10am he was just about to reach for the bottle to kindle his intellect, when the office door swung open and in walked two men, one white and the other black. They barely fit inside, only closing the door by squeezing in too closely together for the comfort of either. Bryant let go of the bottle, regretfully, and leaned back precariously in his chair.

“Good morning, Reed,” he said looking over the top of his pinz nez. Turning his head to Venture, he was suddenly at a loss for words. Before he could break through the fog of his perplexity, Venture said,

“We’re here on business involving cash money. You got to be interested in that! I ain’t no nigger slave, so don’t treat me like one; I am a businessman,” Venture finished.

“We need you to draw us up a contract whereby Venture extends me a loan of \$500 according to terms,” Reed added.

Bryant pinched his black rimmed pinz nez off of his nose, put the spectacles in his vest pocket and asked,

“You want some sort of loan agreement?”

“Yes,” Reed said.

“I will borrow \$500 from Jones here, to be repaid within one month, along with 10% interest. If these terms are not met, then I agree to allow Jones to take a pound of my flesh as penalty for breaking the agreement.”

“What was that last part again?” Bryant asked, not trusting his ears.

Reed said, "For failure to fulfill the terms of the repayment, with interest, within the time specified, I must allow Jones to take one pound of my flesh from the place on my body nearest the heart."

Bryant looked at Jones as he replied, "That's what I thought you said. This is the damnedest thing I ever heard. I've never seen or heard of a specification of this type," he continued.

"Those are the only terms acceptable to me," Jones said, and crossed his arms in front of himself, looking Bryant in the eye.

"Why don't you check through those law books you got over there on that shelving; doesn't look like that dust has been disturbed in a while," Reed added.

"I have no need of referring to those august volumes in this matter," Bryant stated. "Business has been a little slow this year. I had to lay off my cleaning woman. Give me a day and I will have something written up for you to take a look at."

"One thing, uncle," Bryant said looking at Venture, "How is it that you have this much money to loan to a white man?"

"That ain't your business. When I bring you my check, you go to the bank and ask if they would cash it for you. Tell them it's from that nigger who farms cotton north of town with his own slaves on his own land. I'll be back here day after tomorrow to look over the document you draw up."

Venture then turned and squeezed past Reed out of the door into the cold morning, and walked off up the street with Wiley trotting along behind.

Bryant retrieved his spectacles from his coat pocket, replaced them on his nose and looked up quizzically at Reed.

"Are you really prepared to let that nigger damn near kill you over money you borrow from him?"

"I am in desperate need and he is my last resort," Reed said. "But it won't come to that. I have goods on the way that will turn into cash well before the deadline. I want to see that contract ASAP." Reed then let himself out of the office.

Venture returned to his farm in his one-horse buckboard wagon. One of his field hands came up to take the reins and lead the animal into the barn where he unhooked it from the wagon and put the horse out to graze. Walking to the edge of his fields, Venture was met by his foreman, a middle-aged negro who was responsible for organizing the work crews under their own leaders. George Washington Menefee decided which were ready to be picked when the cotton was ready, and which were to be cleaned in the off season. Jones usually spent some time with one of the crews so that he wouldn't forget what it meant to work hard. Menefee had been with Venture for quite some time; worked alongside him in the summer heat and humidity, and in the winter's cold but they seldom exchanged a word on anything that did not have to do with work. Try as he might though, GW could not get used to the fact of another black man owning other blacks as slaves, sharing no solidarity.

GW leaned on his walking stick while looking askance at Venture as he approached. He looked at his master from an angle; GW never stood directly in front of Venture looking him in the eye when they talked. It was as though he was waiting to steal a glimpse of the "real man" when his mask would inevitably slip. It was now some ten years that he had been waiting.

"Where we at today," Venture asked his most trustworthy nigger. Wiley looked up at GW with his ears erect, as though he too awaited the answer.

"I got two crews out fixing fences, and two others clearing the fields down by the river," George replied.

"Anybody out sick or hurt today?" Venture asked. Someone was always malingering somehow.

Supposedly hurt or sick; any excuse not to work. It had been the same when he was in Old Calabar city.

The enslaved would always look for some way to loosen the chains of their condition. They could never accept that it was their own weakness and his strength that had led them into their condition. They wanted to escape at any cost. Venture had sought escape when he had been held as a field worker on St. Thomas. But he had proven that they could not hold a prince as a slave for very long. He had learned how to read by taking lessons from the protestant missionaries active among the slaves on that sugar growing island. Venture's cause was also helped by the fact that he spoke and understood English from his days dealing with British slave-traders in Old Calabar. He spent time with the missionaries as he turned himself into the perfect pagan convert to Christianity. Then he talked his way into the position of being shipped to Europe to receive missionary training himself. When his ship stopped in Virginia on the way, he slipped off and made his way west, eventually buying property in southern Mississippi. It wasn't the best land that was sold to free blacks but he worked hard on it and made himself a better than decent living.

"Well, Kofi say he ain't doing too well today," GW said.

"He's a new nigger who needs to learn a lesson!" Venture spat out.

"Let's go have a look at him."

Together they walked to the other side of the main house and then down among the stone slave cabins. At number three they turned to enter the fetid cabin and saw Kofi laying on a filthy blanket atop a pile of soggy hay. He was young and recently arrived from Africa, not yet seasoned for slave life. Venture thought it was about time to change all of that.

"Get your ass up off that bed!" he shouted. Wiley barked and growled in support of his master.

GW chimed in, "Get up when you spoken to muthafucker!" swinging his cane at the African's head.

Kofi put up his arms to protect himself as he dragged himself up from his bed. "But I am sick today," he said.

"You ain't sick now but you soon will be," Jones snarled.

"GW, take him down to the barn, and tell Ossie to get me my strap, and fix it like I like it!"

"Come on nigger, let's go," GW said as he pushed Kofi roughly out of the door and in front of them along the path to the barn. Wiley bounded ahead of them.

The front of the barn was the place where discipline was executed on the farm. They tied Kofi facing a large rough hewn wooden post sunk solidly into the ground. Many men and women had been there before him. Venture then had GW call in the crews to witness the dispatch of justice. The slave Ossie, a wizened old black man with very tightly curled gray and white hair who was nearly blind, handed Venture a long leather strap that was about an inch thick and four inches wide; it had been marinated in brine before Venture received it, so that its surface was coated with salt—just the way he liked it.

The slave master took the strap and turning to the collected negroes gathered around and said,

"This nigger thinks he don't have to work like everybody else. He thinks he can lay up in bed while you all are out in the field. This slave cost me \$450 and he thinks he has the right to be useless today. Lazy folks get 100 lashes!"

Venture held the strap by its wooden handle and cracked the first blow onto Kofi's back. An angry red welt sprang up where the salt had helped take the skin off, and the blood began to run down his back. Kofi screamed a terrible scream. The second blow elicited another agonized scream, and by number ten the man's legs buckled; he was held upright only by the ropes attached to his wrists and the post. By the time the beating was over, Kofi was long unconscious, his back covered with crisscrossed bloody welts, the ground absorbing pools of blood. Venture kicked at Wiley as he came sniffing the wet ground.

“Cut him down and take him back to his cabin. Now he’s too sick to work,” Venture said.

Four men stepped forward to carry Kofi back to his bed where they laid him on his stomach.

Kofi never spoke again, and no one spoke to him. After a couple of days in bed his body began to smell and he died soon thereafter. The blacks buried him in their grave yard, a piece of thorn-covered useless land where there was no marker of any kind to indicate that Kofi had ever stepped foot upon the Earth. No one cried over him but no one of them forgot what had happened and who had been responsible.

Essie had seen the slaves gathering from the kitchen. Although she could not see Venture laying his strap across the man’s back, she could clearly hear each blow land. “Lord, help me get out of this place,” she thought. Turning away, Isaiah’s face came into her mind, completely erasing the image of the violence below. Then she smiled: “What a thought, that fleeing Liberty would be her ultimate life dream?” That sentence appeared fully expressed in her mind without any effort on her part. But then, who would think that she could love again, after losing her husband and child four years ago? And love a white man? That’s the question that her friends out in the cabins asked her. No one will ever replace my family, my husband, but Isaiah is a good man who loves me; and I am having his child. Most important: he wants to take me away from here. Living with Venture has tried my patience as a Christian woman, she had said. And now-- praise god!-- I will leave this time served in Hell. She would escape tonight with Isaiah and his friends, going by wagon and boat to an uncertain future in New Orleans. Not a bad trade!

“You a good cook,” Venture told Essie that evening at dinner.

“Thank you, sir,” she replied.

Venture was seated at the kitchen table finishing a plate of sweetbreads, a rasher of bacon and cornbread. She stood across the room by the sink and sideboard.

“Do you need anything else this evening?” she asked.

Venture threw a piece of cornbread onto the floor which Wiley scooped up with a snort.

“Ah, I don’t think so. I’m pretty tired tonight. I had to make an example of that Cuffee, coffee, whatever his name is.”

Taking her courage in hand Essie asked, “Did you have to beat him with that strap so many times?”

“You have to keep these niggers scared of you. That’s the way the system works; that is the only way it works. No one accepts being a slave. They’re always studyin’ on how to get free, how to escape the work. I know, I was a slave and I couldn’t think of anything other than getting free some way. The only thing that held me a little bit in line was the fear of what the whites could do to me, right up to killing me if they wanted to. We did the same thing in my country in Africa; you use force freely to keep slaves in line. They are very reluctantly your property.”

“That might explain 50 lashes out of that hundred but what about the rest? How do you explain those?” Essie said.

For that question, he had no answer; at least not one that he cared to put into words. But he thought to himself, you had to enjoy the use of power or else you would not succeed. It was a good feeling but not a nice one.

Out loud, he said, “It’s time to go upstairs and get some sleep.” He rose from the table and said, “Come on dog,” then they both went up the back stairs to bed.

Essie, followed them with her eyes, and thought, better you than me, dog!

A couple of hours later Essie was packed and anxiously waiting behind the house when Isaiah and his friends came to get her. Once in the wagon and on the move through the starlit night, Isaiah told her

about the contract that his father had with Venture. She was astounded and asked if he would not want to stay at home a few days to defend his father if things did not turn out well for him in his business.

“Well, what would you do ?,” he asked. “Where would you stay?”

Essie told him to take her to the large Morris plantation where she could hide out for a few days in the slave quarters with some friends. They agreed that was what she would do. He could not leave his father alone to face such a terrible possibility. The group dropped her off, then scattered to their homes.

Freedom would have to wait a few more days in Liberty.

The next morning, when Venture came down to the kitchen for his breakfast coffee and found the stove cold and no Essie, he knew that she had run off, but he had to put her in the back of his mind and hurry into town to meet with Reed and the lawyer, who had finished their contract ahead of schedule. Both signed the contract that Bryant had drawn up; then he filed it in the small local courthouse at the south end of Liberty’s main street. Not quite two days later Reed learned that his goods had been lost in a shipwreck off the South Carolina coast. The money he had borrowed from Jones was already dispersed; it was gone. He felt honor-bound to notify Jones and Bryant immediately.

Venture had taken another woman into the house to cook and clean for him until he could find Essie, which he was certain that he would do. Finishing breakfast, he called Wiley and headed into town to see Bryant in response to his summons. It was another cold and overcast day as he left his farm but the thought of the profit that he would take on the loan with Reed Jackson warmed his heart. Jones opened the door to the lawyer’s office; inside he saw Bryant huddled together with Isaiah Jackson. Both men looked up at him, their faces expressionless.

“Good morning to you gentlemen,” Jones said. “What are you talking about?” he continued. “I might ask you where you got my woman Essie hid away?”

The younger Jackson glanced at a puzzled looking Bryant, then back at Venture.

"I don't have her hid anywhere. If she is gone, that is your affair. I am here on behalf of my father, who is a very sick man right now. Due to no fault of his own, he cannot now meet the terms of his contract with you. His goods were lost in a shipwreck off the coast."

"Well praise be!" Venture said.

"More like the devil's taken your side," Isaiah responded. "You cannot be so cruel as to insist on enforcement of the penalty in that blasted contract!"

"I stand by what I signed in good faith," Venture replied. "And I am quite ready to take my pound of white man's flesh!"

"Well, ah we will have to gather in the courthouse for the reading of this document and all of its clauses," Bryant said. "Then we shall see what rightfully belongs to whom."

"And when will that be?" Venture inquired.

"Tomorrow at noon," if that is agreeable to all parties. Each man confirmed his attendance. Isaiah stipulated that he would bring Reed unless he was too sick to travel.

"He wasn't too sick to take my money," Venture said.

Isaiah and Venture left Bryant's office. Outside they turned to face each other.

"Do I need to ask your permission to remain on the sidewalk with you?" Venture asked sarcastically.

"Sir, normally the more distance between us the better I like it. I find you absolutely detestable but I don't hold your race against you," Isaiah said.

“You are one white man in a million, then. Perhaps you would not mind returning Essie to me. If you don’t respect me, respect my property rights—I own her!” Venture responded.

“It was a sad day for humanity when some people decided that they could own others and treat them as they wished, universally very poorly, even criminally. You can control a person’s work in slavery and divest them of the fruits of their labor but I am sure that even you know that you cannot control their thoughts or emotions. They remain god’s children with souls; you cannot possibly own a person like you can dumb beasts or inanimate objects. To claim so is only to create a convenient fiction to cover greed and brutality. Essie is a lovely person and we love each other,” Isaiah finished.

There was a brief silence that hung between them; then Venture exploded with laughter, “I didn’t know that you were in seminary, boy! But even so, there is slavery even in your precious bible. So how do you figure that god means something different when it comes to your understanding? All over this world, there is slaves; but I am not a slave and I am not a nigger. I am free and I own land, but white people treat me like a slave, then, I turn around and slaves think I’m like them too, because my skin is black. But, I am a man of property! And I want my property returned to me, just like any white man would, including your father.” Venture said. “And I am going to get what he owes me, too!”

Venture then turned and walked away...not in the street but on the sidewalk.

The next day was clear blue sky and cold, one of those that occasionally grace a southern winter.

Venture showed up at the little court house driving his buckboard wagon, dressed in a gray suit and black beaver-pelt hat. Under his arm, he carried a knife about a foot and a half long in its sheath. Wiley jumped down from the wagon first, and barked a few times at the crowd of people who had gathered there. As Venture stepped forward to enter the courthouse he saw another wagon coming down the street; in it were Reed and Isaiah on the front seat, with Essie in back, her head covered by a scarf.

Venture continued on inside, while the Jacksons tied up their horse outside, got out of the wagon, and

entered. Lawyer Bryant watched the group coming in from his seat in front of the courtroom, where he had set up a small table. Venture sat down on one side of the room, placing his knife on an empty chair beside him; everyone else sat across the room from him, gathered around a pale Reed Jackson. Bryant put on his spectacles and clicked open his watch. Seeing that it was the appointed time, he snapped it shut, put it back into his vest pocket and rose to face those gathered.

“We are here today to execute a most unusual contract, signed by Venture Jones and Mr. Reed Jackson. In it, Jones agrees to lend Jackson the sum of \$500 due in repayment two weeks from the lending date. Failure to repay in a timely manner to result in repayment with 10% interest, and the most unusual penalty of a pound of Mr. Jackson’s flesh, from that part of his body nearest his heart; the procedure to be carried out by Venture Jones. Typically, this kind of contract does not exist between a nigra and a white man but Mr. Jackson insisted on it.”

Jones swelled his chest a bit and allowed himself a small smile while looking across the room at Reed.

“Let’s first hear from each of the signatories in this rather terrible case. Mr. Jones? “

Venture got to his feet and said, “I was kidnapped from my home and brought to this country in chains as a slave. In my country I was the master and others the slaves. Here I gave myself an English name to demonstrate my ambition, burying my real name in silence. I bought my freedom and then I came here and bought land like many others. I worked hard and prospered; I have slaves of my own again.

However, none of these things prevents white men from treating me as though I was still bound with chains because I wear a black skin. I did not understand why I was being treated as a slave, when I was free, a businessman, simply because I shared skin color with those who were slaves. In my country, that is not what we do. Skin color means nothing!”

But I have money, something that white men love and respect more than anything in this world, “ Venture continued. “Even though he had spit into my face I loaned some to this white man, Reed Jackson, who had a need but was abandoned by other whites in his hour of need. For this act I am due more than the usual interest; I am due much more. So he has defaulted on our contract; I will cut a pound of flesh from his living body! He has agreed to it,” he finished. And with that, Venture grasped his knife and threw off its sheath with a cavalier swipe of his arm.

During this rather remarkable speech, it was as though no one breathed in that courtroom. Eyes turned to Reed who had paled and seemed unsteady in his seat. Isaiah bent over him:

“Are you alright, father?” he whispered.

Reed drew himself up in his chair but he could not stand.

He said, “The contract is as has been stated. But, Venture, surely it is a very cruel penalty that you seek. Is there nothing else that will satisfy you? I will pay you twice the interest if only you will put aside your desire to amputate my flesh. I will buy the girl Essie, as well, since she is your property.”

Isaiah, broke in, “I will not agree to pay one cent to have the woman that I love. She is a person not a head of cattle!”

“In my country, a woman is worth no more than a cow,” Venture replied. “But paying for her is not enough; I will have my pound of flesh now.”

At this point, Bryant sat back down in his chair behind his table, and drew towards him a thick volume, one of the law books that he had selected at random from his office shelves. Bryant put on his pinz nez, then opened the tome to a book-marked page, saying,

“This is a volume on contracts according to the laws of the state of Mississippi. I have consulted it closely on the particulars of penalties for default.” For a moment he looked gravely at the audience over the top of his spectacles—strictly for effect.

Then he began to speak as though reading lines from the book:

“In the case of penalties, the defaulter is entitled to collect exactly what has been specified in the contract and nothing more. A violation of this clause shall result in the punishment of said defaulter in strict measure with the injury suffered by the defaulter or his estate.” Lawyer Bryant closed the book, placed it upon the table, and looked at Venture.

Then he said, “Mr. Venture, you may collect your pound of flesh from Mr. Jackson.”

The crowd in the courtroom let out a collective gasp, and Reed almost fell from his chair.

“Sir, have mercy!” Isaiah cried.

Venture raised his knife and approached Reed, his eyes dead like those of a shark.

“But” Bryant said, let me finish. “According to the law, you, Venture, are entitled only to that pound of flesh. If you injure or remove any blood vessels or cartilage; should any blood flow along with your extraction of Mr. Jackson’s flesh, and should any of these losses lead to serious injury or death, you will be executed according to the proportionality called for by the law!”

Venture stopped in his tracks, his knife raised up in his hand.

In a plaintive voice, he asked, “What kind of trick is this?” looking at Bryant.

Bryant replied, “This is no trick: It is the law. You may proceed.”

Venture said, “Ah no, I change my mind. I will take the money, for the penalty and for the girl.”

“Is that agreeable to you, Mr. Reed?” Bryant asked.

Reed Jackson had by now recovered some color to his complexion. He said, “Yes, I will pay the money penalty called for in the contract but no more. I believe that my suffering has paralleled Mr. Jones’s. Let’s leave it at that.”

Venture Jones could not speak. He reached down to the floor and picked up his sheath, returning the blade to it. Every eye was fixed on him as it seemed to take forever to walk out of the courtroom.

A blustery wind had come up, pushing angry gray clouds over Liberty, as Venture Jones walked up the path to his house, with the weathered split-rail fence behind him, worn boots crunching the mud underneath his feet, and Wiley following miserably behind him. His emotions roiled and burned inside his body.

