

# **C O M P R O M I S E ( D )**

A historical legal drama

Based on the freedom suit  
*Julia Logan v. J Berry Meachum*

Draft 9.4

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**TO MY GRANDPARENTS:**

Clara Bell Hall,  
Jessie Tyrone Little,  
Mae Willie Williams,  
& Steve “Sonny Boy” Williams

### **CAST OF CHARACTERS:**

MEACHUM, Griot #1 & Others - late 40s, free Black man, commanding, old-fashioned, and set in his ways

DRAKE, Griot #2 & Others - mid 20s, a principled, yet presumptuous white lawyer, both brains and brawn

### **SETTING:**

Over 12 days, late fall 1835

Primm & Drake Law Firm

Downtown St. Louis, Missouri Territory

### **UNITS OF TIME**

(silence) > (beat) > (pause)

or

(silence)

=

(beat) (beat)

=

(pause) (pause) (pause) (pause)

"To accept one's past—one's history—  
is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it."

-James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

## PROLOGUE:

With lights at full, two Front of House workers prep for the start of the play. They open the theatre and welcome patrons.

Later, once they receive the SM's call, the doors are closed, and they cross directly onstage.

Over the following, the ushers help each other into their respective characters' costumes.

Griot #2/Drake

They're going to say, "You can't drag white people to the theatre, tie them up in their seats like hostages, and berate them for the evils of slavery!"

Griot #1/Meachum

*I know that!* That's not what this is. No one's doing that.

Griot #2/Drake

They're going to say, "It's (insert current year) 2026! Everyone knows slavery was bad."

Griot #1/Meachum

Do they?

Griot #2/Drake

*"No one wants to hear a depressing story about slavery."*

Griot #1/Meachum

It's not. It's about the culture birthed in response to slavery.

Griot #2/Drake

"Don't split hairs," they'll say. "We know about slavery, okay? We've heard it before."

(Silence)

Griot #1/Meachum takes in the audience.

Griot #2/Drake (CONT'D)

What will you say?

Griot #1/Meachum

I'll say: This is a new story.

Griot #2/Drake

No: "An *origin* story!"

Griot #1/Meachum

This is an origin story of an Emancipator; a man born in Goochland County, Virginia; slave country.

Griot #2/Drake

At the turn of the 18th Century. 1789. *Right after* the Revolutionary War gives birth to these United States of America.

Griot #1/Meachum

*Right before* cotton creates unimaginable wealth for some, and unimaginable misery for others.

Griot #2/Drake

This is the story of a black man born into slavery.

Griot #1/Meachum

An enslaved man destined to be *free*.

Griot #2/Drake

This is the story of a family man:

Griot #1/Meachum

A father, husband, brother, and son.

Griot #2/Drake

Of a master builder:

Griot #1/Meachum

A carpenter and cooper.

Griot #2/Drake

The story of a freed man of enterprise:

Griot #1/Meachum

An educator, minister, and entrepreneur.

Griot #2/Drake

The story of a man determined...

Griot #1/Meachum

A man who liberates himself, his family, and his community. This is the story of a black man named Meachum.

Griot #2/Drake

But first, context:

Both

THE PLACE:

Griot #2/Drake

Virginia Colony, British North America.

Both

THE TIME:

Griot #1/Meachum

Late fall - August, 1610.

Both

THE POPULATION:

Griot #2/Drake

350 white colonists.

Griot #1/Meachum

0 enslaved people of color.

Both

They are the first of 12.5 million.

Griot #2/Drake

One man. One woman. Chosen, stolen, and...

Both

STRIPPED!

Griot #1/Meachum

Of their Gods, ancestors, stripped of their culture.

Both

STRIPPED!

Griot #2/Drake

Of their friends, families, stripped of their way of life.

Both

STRIPPED!

Griot #1/Meachum

Of their language, identities, stripped of their names.

Griot #2/Drake

They will be rebranded:

Both

Anthony and Isabella.

Griot #1/Meachum

And against their will, they will be placed on a ship from the other side of the world. The irony in the name of the ship is not lost on me:

Both

*São João Baptista*. (Portuguese: sow joh-OWW bah-TEESH-tah)

Griot #2/Drake

One man. One woman.

Griot #1/Meachum

Along with 350 kidnapped Africans from Angola,

Griot #2/Drake

Will be chained to the hold of a Portuguese slave ship called: *Saint John the Baptist*, ship #1.

Both

Call it karma or destiny or fate

Griot #2/Drake

While on the final leg of its journey to Mexico,

Griot #1/Meachum

This lurching dungeon of death and disease is attacked by two ships. Both with names more fitting their vocation: One called *Treasurer*. Ship #2.

Griot #2/Drake

The other, *White Lion*. Ship #3.

Both

Both ships are British pirate ships.

Griot #2/Drake

The *White Lion*, ship #3, plunders ship #1, *Saint John the Baptist*, in the Gulf of Mexico.

Griot #1/Meachum

The captain of the *White Lion* boards *Saint John the Baptist*, and from the 350 enslaved Angolans he finds in the hold of the Portuguese slave ship, he selects twenty.

Griot #2/Drake

Twenty of the original 350 kidnapped Africans are kidnapped again and taken aboard the *White Lion*, ship #3.

Griot #1/Meachum

Call it karma, or destiny, or fate, but Anthony and Isabella are among the “20 and odd negroes” selected. Kidnapped.

Griot #2/Drake

Meanwhile, our transatlantic Adam and Eve carry *a stowaway*: The first African to be born in the British North American colonies.

Griot #1/Meachum

And the irony of this child’s name is not lost on me:

Griot #2/Drake

“Resolute protector,” or “Strong-willed warrior.”

Griot #1/Meachum

One man. One woman: Anthony and Isabella will conceive *a son*. He is the first African-American, born free in the New World.

Griot #2/Drake

He will be christened: William.

Both

Call it karma or destiny or fate

Griot #1/Meachum

But Anthony, Isabella, and William are chosen again.

Griot #2/Drake

Our first family of three is stolen from ship #1, the Portuguese, *Saint John the Baptist*, originally headed for Vera Cruz.

Griot #1/Meachum

And taken aboard ship #3, the *White Lion*, headed for the American colonies.

Griot #2/Drake

And instead of Mexico, they will land at Point Comfort, off the coast of Virginia.

Griot #1/Meachum

Before Jamestown 1619, but after Sapelo Sound 1526.

Griot #2/Drake

And in exchange for food, one man, one woman, and their son become the first of 12.5 million enslaved Africans sold to wealthy British landowners.

Griot #1/Meachum

It is the beginning of 246 years of U.S. chattel slavery.

Blackout.

SFX: A bell tolls once.

END OF PROLOGUE

## PART I: THE CASE

Darkness. The main area is a law office boasting 1835's contemporary furniture and bookshelves; there is a fireplace and its accoutrements stage left.

Stage right, there is a dry sink with storage space below, and above, a stoneware water dispenser. Further downstage right, mounted on the fourth wall, is the suggestion of a mirror. Even further downstage is the stage apron: a temporal space where direct address happens.

Upstage left, a window overlooks a downtown street. Just left of center, there is the room's only entrance and exit, a glass door with a gold, hand-painted sign that reads: Charles Drake, Attorney at Law.

A shadow moves into view of the glass door, keys rattle, the door clicks open, and a shaft of light pierces the darkness.

Enter DRAKE, late twenties, a promising yet inexperienced white lawyer juggling a satchel, kindling, and a gaslighting wand.

Drake rushes to his desk, and as he drops everything but the wand unceremoniously onto the floor, a black silhouette materializes backlit in the doorway.

Oblivious, Drake crosses downstage and lights the ceiling chandelier. After he puts the wand away, Drake turns upstage, jumps and yelps at:

MEACHUM, late forties, a commanding, free man of color. He carries a cane and hides a limp.

Meachum  
Are you Charles Drake?

Drake  
I am.

Meachum  
We need to talk. I'm being sued. /My name is...

Drake  
(Maliciously)  
/I know all about you and your case. I want nothing to do with it.

Meachum  
(Carefully)  
I need a lawyer.

Drake  
You need to leave. Now! *Enslaver!* (Pause) Fine then. I'll go.

Drake sidesteps Meachum.

Meachum blocks the door.

Drake pauses.

Meachum  
Please. My trial is less than two weeks. /This is urgent!

Drake  
(flabbergasted)  
/You have less than two seconds to remove yourself. 1... 2... I'm warning you...*HELP!*

Meachum steps aside. Drake bolts into the hallway. Meachum pursues.

OFFSTAGE:

Drake (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
Help! Watch! /WATCH!

Meachum (O.S.)  
/No, don't...

SFX: The sound of a scuffle.

Drake re-enters, dragged by Meachum in a panic.

ONSTAGE:

Drake

/Take your hands off me!

Meachum

/What are you doing? You called the Watchman!?

Drake

(Recovering)

I can have you arrested!

Meachum

What the hell is wrong with you!?

Drake

I don't care if you're a free man, Mr. Meachum. That's not your place. *Know your place!*

(Silence)

A standoff.

Meachum blinks first.

Meachum

In my day, when someone asked for help, you helped them.

Drake

See here, that's not how this works. That's not how any of this works. A lot is going on at the moment. Now's not a good time./(To himself) *It's freezing.*

Meachum

/It's the only time I have. I don't know what to do! I try to settle, she refuses. I try to hire a lawyer, no one will take my case. From the looks of it, I'll have to defend myself.

Drake

Well, I can't help you.

Meachum

You can't or you won't?

Drake crosses to his desk, takes out a newspaper, and crumples several sheets.

Drake

Mr. Meachum, you can't show up at my office unannounced and demand my services. I've a 9 o'clock; my partner, Primm, is out, so at the moment, there's no Primm & Drake, there's just Drake; and besides...

Meachum

There's more!?

Drake

Yes! *Slavery is an abomination!*

With the newspaper and kindling, Drake crosses to the fireplace.

Meachum

Agreed.

Drake

*Agreed?* The black man being sued for wrongful enslavement agrees!

Meachum

Looks can lie to you, Mr. Drake.

Drake prepares the fireplace for a coal fire.

Drake

Possibly, but certainly, there's a place in hell for a man who enslaves his own people.

Meachum

*What is your problem!*

Drake

I won't stand in the way of that woman receiving her freedom!

Meachum

Her freedom isn't hers to receive; it's hers to take!

Drake

That may be, but this is a case I can't win; it's a case I wouldn't *want* to win.

Meachum

Are you not Charles Drake, city attorney?

Drake nods, "Yes"

Drake

But I can't help you!

Drake removes a pocket knife and flint and tries to light the kindling.

Meachum gains momentum.

Meachum

I tell you I'm being sued, that I'll have to go to trial alone, and your response is, "I can't help you!?" *What the hell is going on in this city!* You're the city attorney! If not you, then who? Has everyone gone mad? Have I!?

Drake

Alright. Take it easy.

Meachum

Why are you OK standing by while they run roughshod? Why don't you care? If I don't have a lawyer, how will I receive a fair trial? You have an, uh...uh, uh...oh, what's it *called*?

Drake

An obligation.

Meachum

Yes! An obligation to *do* something! It's your job. (Pause) Unless...

Drake

Unless what?

Meachum pieces it together.

Meachum

You don't want me to have a fair trial, you want me "in my place"! *You're on the take!*

Drake

On the what?

Meachum

Oh, don't play possum with me! Shecoonery! *Cuttin' shines!* Is that it? You're city attorney only as far as graft goes?

Drake

What in the world are you talking about?

Meachum

It's a fair question!

Drake

See here, my life would be much easier if I were! Let me tell you. I'd have far fewer enemies in the mayor's office. "On the take!" Truly! If only I were smart enough to accept when I was offered. (Pause) *Shecoonery!?*"

Drake laughs.

Drake (CONT'D)

What did you call it, "*Cuttin' shines?*" (Pause) Mr. Meachum...Truly! Why are you hounding me!?

Drake tries to light the fire.

Meachum

Wrong question. The right question is, "Did I open the damper?"

Drake

What?

Meachum

Your damper's closed!

Over the following, Drake checks for an updraft; there isn't one. He opens the damper.

Meachum (CONT'D)

Your appointment is in an hour. I understand you can't take my case. Would you at least offer advice? Please, Mr. Drake. Allow me to give specifics, and then you're free to whatever self-righteous conclusion you...

SFX: An insistent cop knock at the front door startles the men.

(Silence)

They exchange looks.

Drake puts down the knife and flint and gets up.  
Both men cross to look out the window.

Drake  
(Hushed)

Great. It's the Watchman...

Meachum  
(Hushed)

Well, you called him.

Drake hurries out of the office to the front door.

SFX: The outer door clicks open.

Over the following, Meachum drops the mask:  
Panting, he places all his weight onto his cane and flinches with every step center stage. He collapses heavily into the chair and shakes and rubs his right leg. He is in excruciating pain.

Drake (O.S.)

...yes, of course...(Pause) No, no, that won't be necessary. No, Constable, there's no need...(Pause) Right you are. There has definitely been a lot going on lately, sure... "*Concerned Citizens*"? (Pause) What are "*Concerned Citizens*?" (Pause) I see. No, Constable, I haven't... (Pause) Yes, I will if I see anything. Good day.

SFX: The outer door clicks close.

Drake re-enters as Meachum returns to the window and replaces the mask.

(Beat)

A standoff.

Drake blinks first.

Drake (CONT'D)

You have until 9. And I mean it, I cannot take your case. (To himself) ...*Concerned citizens.*

Meachum

I understand.

Drake crosses to the fireplace, lights it, and places lumps of coal onto the fire.

Meanwhile, Meachum continues to watch the Constable down the sidewalk from the window.

Over the following, Drake opens shop.

(Silence)

Meachum (CONT'D)

(Awkwardly)

Your first year of private practice in St. Louis?

Drake

(Annoyed)

Mr. Meachum, I'm serious, you have less than an hour!

Meachum

No time for common courtesy?

Drake shrugs.

Drake

It's your time.

Meachum

I'll start. My name is John Berry Meachum.

Drake

I know who you are.

Meachum

My wife, Mary, and I are from Kentucky. We have two boys, John and William. And we have been in St. Louis for twenty years.

Drake arches a brow, dry.

Drake

Pleasure.

Meachum

Your turn. You're new to St. Louis from...?

Drake

Cincinnati. Newly married. No children yet.

Meachum

Your first year of private practice here in St. Louis?

Drake nods, "Yes"

Drake

Just so.

Meachum

And...?

Drake

(Impatiently)

And I have a splitting headache. How can I help you, Mr. Meachum?

Drake gestures for Meachum to sit as he continues his chores. Meachum continues to stand.

Meachum

I've been without a lawyer for most of the proceedings.

Drake

So, I've heard.

Meachum

Until recently, I've thought of representing myself, but no one

Drake

/Not a good idea.

Meachum

No one will represent me! Until last week, I had all but given up finding a lawyer.

Drake

What happened?

Meachum

I'm not sure, but something's off.

Drake

What do you mean?

Meachum

OFF!

Drake

You can't just bark, "off," and expect me to understand.

Meachum

They're plotting something! But I don't know what it is. What do you know about my case?

Drake continues to open shop.

Drake

It's in all the press. A novel case. Complicated, too. A freedom suit, which is typically when enslaved black people sue their white slaveowners for their freedom. But you, a well-to-do, freed black man, are being sued by a black woman for wrongful enslavement.

Meachum

Quite so. Wednesday, one of the men who used to own Julia, turned in written testimony...

Drake

Julia's the woman suing you?

Meachum nods, "Yes"

Meachum

Get this, her former owner testified he knew Julia was working, but was unaware of where she was or how she got there.

(Pause)

Drake stops in his tracks.

Drake

Well, that's unlikely.

Meachum

That's what I thought! Why would he say that?

Drake

I'm not sure, but you're right: */something's off*.

Meachum

*/Something's off*.

Drake crosses to his desk. He hurriedly takes out a quill, an ink stand, foolscap paper, and takes notes.

Meachum (CONT'D)

Julia hired out for a temporary job and was returned after a month. A few years later, she was sold to me.

Drake

Where was this?

Meachum

Where was what?

Drake

Where did she hire out?

Meachum

Indiana.

Drake  
(Knowingly)

*Exactly* what I figured!

Drake takes a note.

Meachum

What?

Drake  
(Excitedly)

Indiana's a free state. How long was she hired out in Indiana?

Meachum

A month. Why?

Drake lives for cases like this.

Drake

They're trying to duck responsibility, but what they're actually doing is placing Julia in a free state.

Meachum

What do you mean?

Drake

Julia's best argument for freedom is "once free, always free." Do you have the bill of sale?

Meachum

No.

Drake

Did you ever have one, or was it misplaced?

Meachum

I seem to have mislaid it.

Drake

Well, what can you tell me about the transfer of ownership?

Meachum

The day I purchased Julia?

Drake nods, “Yes”

Drake

Right you are.

Meachum

Well, for one, Newton was laying it on with a trowel! Bragging that our agreement bound him to defend me against any other claims to Julia. /He really wanted to

Drake

/Wait. There was a liability clause!?

Meachum nods, “Yes”

Drake (CONT'D)

A handshake or in writing?

Meachum

In writing.

Drake

Truly! Mr. Meachum, that’s significant, substantial. *That’s* your best line of defense.

Meachum

Is it?

Drake nods, “Yes”

Drake

Contractually, you’re not liable. Mr. Meachum. *You need that bill of sale.*

Meachum

I guess I'd better find it, then. (Pause) Drake, my trial is in twelve days. Will you please reconsider? I can pay.

Drake

Mr. Meachum, I understand that, but I cannot take your case. As we speak, my partner Primm is in the hospital recovering from heart failure and ...

Meachum

*Man, sakes alive!* I'm sorry to hear that.

Drake

Thank you. That's to say, the office is helter-skelter at the moment. I'm managing double my normal caseload.

Meachum

Is he going to be alright?

Drake

We don't know.

Meachum

How are you holding up?

Drake shrugs.

Drake

My head feels like it's in a vice. I'm overwhelmed, but I'm doing my best.

Meachum

Old folks used to say, if you're doing your best, then there's nothing more anybody can ask of you.

Drake is moved.

Drake

Yes...yes, that's right.

(Pause)

Drake (CONT'D)

Who's Julia's attorney?

Something, “Bird.”  
Meachum

*Gustavus* Bird?  
Drake

I think so.  
Meachum

Ooh, Mr. Meachum...  
Drake  
(Dreadfully)

Drake gets up from his desk and continues his chores.

Do you know him?  
Meachum

You have to settle.  
Drake

Whoa, wait. What’s the problem?  
Meachum

Settle! Do you understand? Contact Julia. Settle this. Now. Out of court. You can’t defend yourself against Bird.  
Drake

Drake, confidence!  
Meachum

You don’t understand. Bird has made a name for himself representing black people, bringing freedom suits. They call him: “The Vulture.” He doesn’t lose. He’s *ruthless*. You have to convince her to settle.  
Drake

But she won’t do it.  
Meachum

Offer her money.  
Drake

Meachum

I have; she won't take it.

Drake

What does she want?

Meachum

She wants it official.

Drake

What, like attention?

Meachum

No, I think it's deeper than that. She's been enslaved her whole life. And for her whole life, her entire family has been enslaved. Take a moment to think about that. If I were her, I would be panicked that if I didn't do something, and something drastic ...

Drake

Even still, how is this the way to go about it?

Meachum

If her freedom is dependent on an arrangement with a free black man, that's one thing; but if her freedom is determined by the St. Louis Circuit Court, that's a whole other matter.

Drake

You do know she's suing you, don't you?

Meachum

Of course.

Drake

Then why are you defending her?

Meachum

Why would I not?

Drake

Well, I can think of a reason.

Meachum

We're on the same side.

Drake

You, *literally*, are not!

Meachum

We both want an end to slavery! I fight the old-fashioned way, compromise: I win some, you win some. Julia's way, this new way: I win, you lose, is not going to fly, not for long.

Drake

If you say so.

Meachum

(Hopefully)

I say so. Well, what do you think?

Drake

It's a matter of whether the time Julia worked in Indiana was long enough to establish residency.

Meachum

I see.

Drake

Fair warning. What I'm about to say: all generalities. I don't have specifics.

Meachum

Drake, relax. I'm not going to sue you.

Drake

Right you are. The bad news is, it's going to be an uphill battle for you.

Meachum

The good news?

Drake

Public sentiment is turning. There's a growing backlash against abolition, and you may be able to use this to your advantage.

Meachum

A start.

Drake  
(Jokingly)

Also, the judge happens to be supportive of your cause.

Meachum eyes Drake.

Meachum  
It's not my cause. Do you know him?

Drake  
The 22nd Judicial Circuit has only one judge, Judge Lawless. /I know him well.

Meachum  
Judge *Lawless*! Are you serious?

Meachum nods, "No," and paces.

Drake  
I kid you not. The judge's name is Lawless.

Meachum  
(To himself)  
*From bad to worse...*

Drake  
(Hesitantly)  
You've several options. I do not condone this, but...I've seen intimidation, harassment ...

Meachum frowns.

Drake (CONT'D)  
Or you could...remove Julia from the court's jurisdiction.

Meachum  
KIDNAP!?

Drake  
I'm not telling you what to do! I'm just telling you what's been done.

Meachum

(Exasperatedly)

Drake. What's my best *legal* line of defense?

Drake

Taking advantage of the balance of power.

Meachum

Plain speak, please.

Drake

(Delicately)

You plead property rights. Julia is your property. Therefore, she is not a person. And because she is not a person, she is not entitled to freedom and protection under the law.

(Silence)

Meachum

My best line of defense is slavery?

Drake

Yes. The bill of sale is proof of the argument of property rights.

Meachum

I can't do that.

Drake

It's the strategy defendants ...

SFX: A bell tolls once.

Meachum

Sounds like that's our time. What do I owe?

Drake

It's no trouble. I'm sorry about earlier.

Meachum

(Jokingly)

What? You mean the constable? ...*snitch*.

Meachum makes to exit.

Drake

We're a lot alike, you and me.

(Pause)

Meachum pauses.

Meachum

*What did you say?*

Drake

(Carefully)

Uh...you and me. We're the same. People underestimate us. You, because you're black. Me, because I'm green.

Meachum

I see. How did you get to St. Louis, Mr. Drake?

Drake

By way of a detour through the Mediterranean. How did you get to St. Louis?

Meachum

From Mitchum plantation in Kentucky.

Drake

Is "Mitchum" how you became "Meachum"?

Meachum nods, "Yes"

Meachum

At the point of my story, I'm a free man, right? I've already self-purchased. And Mitchum, the white man who sold me my freedom, calls me to his deathbed.

Drake

What was it?

Meachum

I'm getting to it! Says he, he's not long for this world, that he would make one last request of me. He promises to free his slaves on the condition I walk them out of Kentucky.

Drake

What did you think?

Meachum

I was in a taking! What did I think...We both knew he was asking me to risk my freedom; he was asking me to risk my life. Free papers or no, if we were caught by slave catchers, I could be sold downriver or killed.

Drake

What did you do?

Meachum

I agreed.

Drake

You agreed. Why?

Meachum

That's the way we did things. If someone needed help, you helped them as best you could. I walked a group of newly freed black people eighty miles to Indiana, the better part of three days. And once that was done, I turned around and walked three days back to find Mitchum had passed, and my wife and children had been sold.

Drake

*Mitchum sold your wife and children!?*

Meachum

Sakes alive, man. No! We were in a broad marriage. Mary was my wife, but we didn't live together. We lived on different plantations, had different owners. Her owner sold her.

Drake

I follow. So what did you do?

Meachum

I walked.

Drake

You walked?

SFX: A gentle knock at the outer door.

Meachum

Over eight hundred miles, here, to St. Louis.

Drake

Truly!

Meachum

My point is this: You and I may share some common ground, Drake, but we are not the same.

Meachum makes to exit.

Drake

I didn't mean to suggest...Mr. Meachum, wait! Give me a week, will you?

Meachum pauses.

Meachum

But my trial is in twelve days.

Drake

It's the best I can do.

Meachum

Right you are.

Drake

Let's see if we can't come up with a more palatable line of defense. (Awkwardly) Yes, well...

Lights crossfade from the office onto the apron as Meachum crosses into the dark and Drake crosses into the light.

BREAK INTO PART II

Drake

When he told me he had walked eight hundred miles to St. Louis, I believed him. One of the first things I noticed was his walking stick and the hitch in his step. He did not call me "master" or "sir." He didn't bow and scrape.

(MORE)

## Drake (CONT'D)

There was nothing subservient in the way he addressed me. And I was surprised, taken aback. Confused may be the better word. The next thing was his clothes, probably fashionable in his day, were outdated. Mind you, he was fastidious, neat. He was put together, but... history just didn't track. Some things didn't add up that he refused to explain; he was making obvious omissions, and for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why.

Let me explain.

St. Louis is a waterfront city. And most people make their living directly or indirectly from the shipping industry. Imports and exports. Goods and materials to be exported are packed into barrels and loaded on steamers to be sold. Importing works the same way. Everything is packed into barrels. St. Louis is dependent on barrels. And John Berry Meachum, among other things, is a cooper. John Berry Meachum's a barrel-maker in St. Louis. *He has money!* Why walk!? Take a steamer. Dress in the latest fashions. Hire the most powerful lawyer in St. Louis. Why are you here in my office? It doesn't make sense...

*Who is this man*, I thought.

Gut reaction? He's hiding something. Clearly. Understandably, he seemed panicked. Which tracked: he's being sued, I get it. But there was something else about him. Something in his eyes, something that had nothing to do with the case. An urgency underneath everything he said, the undercurrent to everything he did. And whatever it was, I didn't trust it. I didn't trust *him*.

The case is in all papers; it's all anyone can talk about. Everyone has an opinion. The lawyers I knew, we all agreed none of us wanted to go anywhere near it.

So why do I agree to take the case?

MUSIC CUE #1: A single voice hums "Roll the Old Chariot":

(Oh, we'd be alright...)

(Oh, we'd be alright...)

He seemed like a man accustomed to things going his way and was at a loss now that they weren't. He seemed cornered. Afraid. He seemed alone. I told the man, "You and me, we're the same."

Drake shakes his head in embarrassment.

What I meant to say was *I have been where you are*.

When he arrived in my office that cold morning in November, I knew I was meeting a man at the lowest point of his life. I had been alone at rock bottom. Thousands of miles away from friends and family. And like Meachum, with no legal representation.

To understand why I took the case, you have to understand my relationship with Daniel Drake. One of the most cherished aspects of my relationship with my father was the letters we wrote each other. Letters he preserved, then returned to me before his death.  
(Pause) POPS!

Daniel Drake /Meachum appears.

Drake (CONT'D)

Gibraltar?

Daniel Drake /Meachum nods, "Yes"

END MUSIC CUE

Daniel Drake/ Meachum

The place: Cincinnati, OH.

The time: Spring, 1811.

Drake

Childhood was hard. Father had a medical practice, but not much money. I was born immediately after the death of my parents' first child. And though they were diligent in raising their children, their feelings led them to postpone discipline, initiating an unexpected chain of events.

From father's letters:

Daniel Drake/Meachum

"Charles has a character which has become distressing to us in the highest degree. His Uncle Ben has taken to calling him, "harum-scarum boy," only somewhat jokingly. We have a *painful* foreboding concerning him."

MUSIC CUE #2: A single voice sings "Roll the Old Chariot":

Oh, we'd be alright...

Oh, we'd be alright...

Over the following, Drake removes his frock coat, and Daniel Drake/Meachum proudly helps him into his Navy Midshipman's mess jacket.

Daniel Drake/Meachum (CONT'D)

"I have thought much on the Navy as a suitable school for Charles. One cruise in the Mediterranean would give him steadiness of purpose, and should he acquire it, I could dedicate him to a profession."

END MUSIC CUE

SFX: The SOUNDSCAPE of a peaceful, sunny day at sea.

Daniel Drake/Meachum (CONT'D)

The place: Norfolk, VA.

The time: Winter, 1828.

Drake

Nothing could have been better than sailing the seven seas, seeing every day something new, and becoming an officer and a gentleman. As usual, I looked at the rosy side of the future without suspecting there might be a dark side...Despite father's efforts, the time of bad influence had not yet passed for me. Profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity were the rule, their absence the exception. All made worse by hard drinking.

SFX: The SOUNDSCAPE of a naval ship storm-tossed at sea.

Daniel Drake/Meachum

The place: Mediterranean Sea.

The time: Spring, 1829.

In Gibraltar, the night of my seventeenth birthday, there was a westward gale blowing, with thick weather and a heavy groundswell. All hands were called and sent down. Later, the lower anchor was let go, knocking a quarter gunner into the drink:

Messmate/Meachum

*MAN OVERBOARD!*

MUSIC CUE #5: Over the following, men's voices in 4-part harmony sing "Roll the Old Chariot."

And we'll roll the old chariot along  
And we'll roll the old chariot along  
And we'll all hang on behind

Drake crosses into the darkness upstage.  
Messmate - Meachum hands him a lit lantern as he climbs on top of his desk.

Drake

With the agility of cats, men jumped into the gangway boat as I grabbed a lantern and climbed to a place where I could see the whole thing. With great haste, the gangway boat was lowered from the ship, then dropped into the surging waves. *And then came danger.* The small boat was swept backwards and plunged forward again and again, and each time in danger of taking on water.

SFX: The SHRILL of a boatswain's pipe.

Messmate/Meachum

*HE'S AT THE GANGWAY!*

Messmate/Meachum exits.

Drake

The man overboard was spotted, and a rope was let down, but the gangway boat had been put out in search of him. And though he grasped the rope, there was no way to get him aboard, nor any way to get down to him. Like the gangway boat, the angry sea threatened to overwhelm the poor fellow, and yet he held on for dear life. I looked down at his frightened, upturned face, just as he was swept off into the darkness, and cried out: "*For God's sake, don't let me go!*"

END MUSIC CUE

Over the following, Drake climbs down from his desk. Daniel Drake - Meachum enters, snuffs out the lantern, and gruffly removes Drake's Navy uniform.

Drake (CONT'D)

Shortly thereafter, I would be reassigned to another ship. I would get into a fight and be placed under arrest. I would be threatened with court-martial.

(Silence)

It was the lowest point of my life. I was 17 years old. A boy five thousand miles from home. Confined. Friendless! And, like John Berry Meachum, I had no counsel. Utterly ignorant of court-martial, I was terrified at the idea of being brought before one. There was no one to tell me what I see plainly now, that if I had been tried, the court would not have dismissed me from the service. Nor was there anyone to tell me that the very last thing I should have done was to resign! I was left to act by myself and, looking for the shortest way out of trouble, I took the very worst one.

Over the following, Daniel Drake - Meachum carefully helps Drake back into his frock coat, hands him a portmanteau, and gives his blessing.

SFX: The SOUNDSCAPE of a bustling commercial riverfront.

Daniel Drake/Meachum

The place: St. Louis, MO.

The time: Present day, 1835.

Daniel Drake/Meachum exits.

Drake

Despite how much I insisted I would not take his case, deep down...I knew. There's a moment that happens when you know everything afterwards will be different. A chance encounter would end up changing the course of my entire life. And come to think of it, he never told me why he chose my office that day. But it doesn't matter. Somehow, the few life experiences I had had until then had made me uniquely qualified for the case.

Blackout.

SFX: A bell tolls seven times.

END OF PART I