

About *So Help Me God*

Television evangelist, Thomas Jeremiah Luther miraculously awakens from a twelve year coma. He re-takes his world-wide ministry, and searches for a way to seize the control of the Christian conservative political power in America. When a teenage member of his congregation almost dies from an abortion, he convinces her family to file a multi-million dollar medical malpractice case against the physician and abortion clinic. He knows that manipulating the case into a giant verdict will shut down abortion clinics all over the country, causing power brokers, presidents, and the political right wing to flock to his door. To assure victory, he hires J. Robert Tisdale, the best plaintiff lawyer in Texas.

Tod Duncan, the lawyer for the defense, finds his mettle challenged when his client's livelihood is destroyed by Luther's public claims that he is a murderer. Duncan takes the offensive, suing the money machine behind Luther of slander. To escape liability T. J.'s legal team must prove that human life begins on conception. Great characters bring this challenging balance of art, science and philosophy to a jury charged with answering one of life's most difficult questions; when does life begin? The twists and turns captivate readers and leads to an ending that might be unbelievable were it not set in Texas.

Praise for *So Help Me God*

"Thanks for disrupting my sleep for two nights. I couldn't put the book down and hated to read the last page. I'm still really excited about it."

George Pletcher, Legendary Trial Attorney

"*SO HELP ME GOD* is inarguably the best fiction novel I have read in years! The book is imaginative in the characters chosen and their personalities, backgrounds and their respective roles. It is impossible to put this book down! Kudos to Mr. Thompson for his first novel. Your brother, Tommy Thompson, would be very proud of you! I look forward to the sequel."

George J. Abdo, M.D., Renowned World Traveler

“His novel is a wonderful, insightful exploration of the most legislated and litigated area in all of medicine – abortion. As an obstetrician who has both a medical and now increasingly strong grasp of the legal issues in this great debate, I found that Mr. Thompson has struck at the very heart of the problem from both perspectives.”

Robert J. Carpenter, Jr., M.D., Maternal Fetal Specialist and LII

“*SO HELP ME GOD* is a wonderful novel, told with wit and style. The colorful cast of characters is unforgettable and every page begs you to read the next.”

Nicola Perone, M. D., President-Elect, Houston Gynecological and Obstetrical Society

“It is a great book and one that keeps the reader anxiously awaiting the next unexpected turn of events and the final outcome.”

J. Stanley Conner, M.D., Ob/Gyn Specialist 40+ years

“An incredibly well written book. Larry has skillfully woven the legal, medical, scientific, and moral elements of his novel into a fast paced riveting story. It is a terrific read.”

Raymond Kerr, Mediator, Past President Houston Bar Association

About the Author

A veteran Texas trial lawyer, Larry D. Thompson has drawn upon decades of experience in the courtroom to produce his first novel, *So Help Me God*. Thompson, a one-time journalism major who used his talent for writing to excel at the University Of Texas School Of Law is now managing partner of the Houston trial firm he founded. He is the proud father of three grown children, an active golfer, SCUBA diver, runner and outdoor enthusiast. His biggest inspiration both in life and literature is his late brother, best-selling author Thomas Thompson.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The most experienced trial attorneys know that our role in the legal process is unique and invaluable. We do not determine the outcome of our cases, how the public views the issues or even how the laws of the country apply in any given cause. Those matters are determined by the witnesses, the scientific evidence, the jury's perspectives, the judge's inclinations and the finality of appellate review. Yet as trial attorneys we are called upon to bear the burden of presenting the best, most persuasive, direct evidence supporting but one side of any cause. We advocate for views we may not share, but will fight to the death for the right of each position to have a full voice in our society, to have full exposure to the heat of public debate, to have its place in the shaping of the mores of our society and to succeed or fail on its own merits. It is therefore, with the pride of more than thirty-five years of advocating before juries, that I bring the process, the science, and the art of advocacy of controversial issues to the fiction reading public to share the joy, exasperation and wonderment of the civil courtroom in America today. It is not ours to change opinions, but to test and challenge those opinions in the light of great advocacy.

Respectfully submitted,
Larry D. Thompson
Lorance & Thompson, P.C.
Houston, Texas

PROLOGUE

The storm raged in from the Gulf of Mexico. Only thirty minutes earlier, the stars shone through a dark blue autumn sky. Claps of thunder, like a drum roll, heralded the tempest's arrival shortly before it struck the small city on Galveston Bay. Wind howled through the treetops and drove the rain sideways. Windows rattled in their casements. Hail pinged off the pickup trucks and cars. Great bolts of lightning struck the neighborhood, illuminating the small form of a teenage girl, shuffling down the middle of the street, clothes soaked to the skin as she clutched her shoes. The rain matted the girl's hair and cascaded down her face where it was joined by tears streaming from her eyes. Shoulders slumped, she wiped her eyes with one hand and touched the right side of her lip to check for bleeding. Lost in thought, the girl ignored the storm, the lightning, and the overflowing streets. As she turned the corner and walked up the sidewalk, she put her shoes on, straightened up and used both hands to wipe her face before opening the door. She hollered to her parents, "I caught a ride home. I'm going to bed."

After closing the door, she collapsed on the bed and buried her face in a stuffed bear.

CHAPTER 1

For twelve years the faithful had journeyed from around the world to view the comatose man whose life depended on the feeding tube in his abdomen. This Christmas Eve morning was no different. They began arriving at The City of Miracles on the west side of Fort Worth at dawn. The parking lot resembled Universal Studios. Young men and women in tan slacks and white shirts directed traffic.

By nine o'clock, hundreds were gathered. When the gates opened, a guide escorted the first group inside. The young woman who led them resembled a college cheerleader, blond, blue-eyed, a face filled with eagerness and religious fervor. As they walked, she explained where they were going and what they would see. "My name is Naomi. Twelve years ago today, a demented woman stabbed Reverend Thomas Jeremiah Luther, The Chosen, in the heart as he left a revival at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas. They rushed him to the hospital where he was not expected to live. He refused to die. After months, they could do nothing more so we brought him back here where we could care for him and wait for him to be born once again. You will see him where he lies in state. He has been in a coma for twelve years, fed by a tube and cared for by those of us who believe in him. Five years ago, we took him off life support at the directive of The City's Board of Governors. Since then, the doctors have repeatedly declared him clinically dead, but each time a miracle has brought him back.

"The finest doctors in the world have evaluated his condition over the years. They have reached the same conclusion. He will never wake up. He will always be in a vegetative condition and there is nothing we can do except care for him until his death.

“We know the doctors are wrong. They do not understand the power of prayer or believe in miracles. We know that he will not die. Our Father has much more work for him to do in this life. When the time is right, he will awaken and take his rightful place as the spiritual leader of The City of Miracles. Once again, his voice will be heard throughout the world.”

They arrived at the center of the city and found themselves standing in front of an unimpressive, round dome that rose twenty feet above the ground. It could have been a tomb or a bunker or a landed spacecraft. The young woman asked the assembled group to form a single-file line and to bow their heads as they entered. One by one, they vanished into the shadows of the dome. Smoky oil lamps provided a faint light. The circular walkway surrounded a smaller, slightly glowing glass dome, thirty feet in diameter.

“Please be silent and follow your guide along the walkway. There will be room for each of you to view The Chosen. As soon as you position yourselves facing the dome, we will begin,” a voice commanded through loud speakers.

The glass dome covered a modern and fully functional intensive care unit fifteen feet below the level where the visitors stood. In the middle of the unit was a hospital bed. On it lay the frail, almost lifeless body of Thomas Jeremiah Luther, a.k.a. The Chosen, covered in white linen with only a red blotch carefully placed over his heart where the knife had entered twelve years earlier. His face was the picture of serenity. A light shone on it, forming a halo above his head. A close look revealed a barely perceptible rise and fall of his chest. To his right a young man dressed in a white robe sat ceremoniously on a rock, reminiscent of the scene that Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, had seen three days after Jesus had been crucified.

As the visitors took their places, the nurses stopped what they were doing and stood off to the side to permit the faithful to take in the entire scene. A portrait of Jesus hung on one wall. Eyes filled with compassion, he seemed to stare at the man in the bed. Reverend Luther himself had done the portrait when he was a resident in the

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Tarrant County jail many years before. The portrait had been moved to The City when The Chosen was at the height of his power.

The faithful silently witnessed the scene before them for five minutes before the young man on the rock started speaking.

“...as he cared for us in life we care for him as he lies in limbo before you. The ladies in white provide physical and pulmonary therapy three times a day. He does not need life support. He is on no regular medication. Occasionally, he blinks his eyes. Otherwise, he shows no sign of life. Yet, we know he lives and some day will rise to lead us again. It has been prophesied that on an anniversary of his near-death he will awaken. For twelve years, people like you have gathered here on that anniversary and prayed for his return. For whatever reason, God has not given him back to us. Now the lights are going to dim and you will be in total darkness. Do not be afraid. For the one minute that you are in darkness, think instead about the twelve years that The Chosen has been in darkness and pray silently to our God to return him to us.”

The lights dimmed as the lamps were snuffed out and the room went black. The visitors could not see their families beside them. They could only reach out and clasp hands. After about thirty seconds of silence, a woman in the crowd started crying, quietly at first before her crying turned to wailing and gasping for air. Then she sank to her knees as grief overwhelmed her.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” A voice, soft and weak, asked the question.

At first no one knew where it came from until the young man on the rock shouted, “Turn on the lights. It’s him!”

CHAPTER 9

Joanna ran to the kitchen phone and dialed 911. She found Bo in the garage and explained Lucy's condition on their way back to her room. As soon as they heard the siren, Bo raced to the door to meet the two young EMTs.

"Mrs. Brady, I'm Jack Alford. Tell me what you know about your daughter's situation."

While she did so, he walked to the bed and started his examination. He put an automatic thermometer in Lucy's mouth, at the same time checking her pulse. The thermometer beeped. "Her temperature's now one hundred and five degrees with a pulse of one hundred and ten." Wrapping a blood pressure cuff around her arm, he said, "eighty over fifty-five." Looking at the blood on the pajamas and sheets, he turned to Joanna and Bo.

"Mrs. Brady, this is not the flu. It's much more serious. She has a raging infection and internal bleeding. I don't see bleeding from anywhere but her vagina. Has she had serious kidney or bladder problems?"

Getting a negative response, he continued, "How about problems with her uterus or a recent abortion?"

Shocked, Joanna replied, "She's never had any unusual female problems and she certainly hasn't had an abortion."

"Well, ma'am, we've got to get her to the hospital in a hurry. he's a very sick little girl."

His assistant had already returned with a stretcher and they carefully lifted her onto it while her parents watched, the horrified looks on their faces not beginning to express their feelings.

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“Mrs. Brady, you can ride with us. Mr. Brady, I suggest that you follow along in your truck.”

Within two minutes Jack and his assistant were in the ambulance with Lucy and Joanna. As they pulled away from the curb, the red lights reflected off the houses and the siren filled the neighborhood. Jack started an IV using Ringers lactate. Next, he called the emergency room, describing his patient and making sure that the emergency room doctor was available.

Dr. Sean Kelley, the emergency physician, met the ambulance at the door, and started checking Lucy as the attendants wheeled her into the hospital. He ordered a stat complete blood count as he repeated what the ambulance attendants had done. Her temperature remained at one hundred and five degrees; her erratic pulse bounced between one hundred and five and one hundred and twenty and her respiratory rate was twenty-eight. Within minutes he had the blood work results. Her white count was twenty-one thousand and her hemoglobin and hematocrit were nine and twenty-six, indicating that she had lost a significant amount of blood and needed a transfusion. Lucy faded in and out of consciousness. For the few moments when her eyes were open, she was delirious and confused, not understanding where she was or why. She didn't even recognize her parents. Dr. Kelley's mind raced over the medical possibilities.

“Lucy, did you have an abortion? Lucy, can you hear me? Answer me!” He shook her gently. “Lucy tell me about your abortion!” He shouted.

Joanna almost intervened. It was not possible. Then Lucy stirred and murmured, “Friday.”

Joanna collapsed and Bo led her to a row of chairs where he lowered her into one.

The pieces of the puzzle now fit together. Dr. Kelley was convinced that Lucy had a botched abortion. He gave orders to the emergency room nurses. “I think this girl has sepsis caused by something that went wrong with an abortion. We need a gynecologist who also handles infectious diseases and a hematologist. We need to get her to the medical center in a hurry. Call Life Flight. Take one

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point, three seven-five grams, Gentamycin, one hundred and twenty milligrams, and Clindamycin, nine hundred milligrams. Start oxygen by mask, then a heart monitor and pulse oximeter. Also, draw blood to start cultures.”

The blood would replace what Lucy had lost and to help stop the bleeding. The three medications were broad-spectrum antibiotics. Without knowing the specific bacteria, Dr. Kelley had no way of knowing exactly which antibiotic would be effective. The blood cultures would help the medical center physicians determine the exact bacteria and the correct antibiotics to fight it. In the meantime, Dr. Kelley could use a shotgun approach and hope that he would get lucky. As to what was happening in the uterus, the gynecologist would need to evaluate that condition. His worst fear was that Lucy would develop septic shock. As he completed his instructions, a nurse approached the bed, and after a brief, quiet conversation with her, Dr. Kelley turned to speak to Lucy’s parents. His reassuring voice hid his concerns. “Mr. and Mrs. Brady, I’ve done what I can for Lucy right now. The nurses are taking good care of her. In the meantime, I’ve just been told that we have a man here who is complaining of severe abdominal pain and I need to check on him. I’ll only be a few seconds away. The nurses know exactly what to do. They’ll call me if there’s a problem. Life Flight should be here in about thirty minutes.”

“Is she going to be all right?” Joanna asked, trying to control the quiver that had taken over her voice.

“I hope so Mrs. Brady. Once we get her to the medical center, she will have the best care in the world. She’s very sick, but if anyone can pull her through, they can.”

He could have added that she had only about one chance in three of making a recovery without some significant, life-long medical problem. Now was not the time for such straight talk. Dr. Kelley excused himself to take care of the other patient. Joanna and Bo watched as the nurses went about their assignments, starting antibiotics, hooking up various machines, drawing blood and placing an oxygen mask over Lucy’s mouth and nose.

Then Joanna turned to Bo and quietly said, “We need to be praying.”

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She walked over to Lucy's bed, got down on her knees on the hard floor, and touching Lucy's arm, started praying for her daughter's life. Bo saw what she was doing and kneeled beside her, head bowed, with his arm around the shoulders of his wife of twenty-five years. The nurses' voices were stilled and they silently joined in the prayer. Unlike the Bradys, they knew the odds were against Lucy. While the nurses were doing all they could, they were willing to hope that prayers might save Lucy's life.

Joanna continued to watch the nurses checking vital signs every ten minutes and the monitors. They asked about the helicopter and they waited. Dr. Kelley came into the cubicle, checking Lucy with a grim look on his face, then hurrying back to the patient next door. After about twenty minutes, a nurse started a blood transfusion. The Bradys saw it as a sign of some progress and some hope. Then the head nurse approached.

"The helicopter will be here in five minutes. We're beginning preparations. Your daughter is stable. We're going to temporarily disconnect the monitors. She will still have the IV and blood bag attached. Once the transfer is made, the EMTs will be monitoring her in the helicopter. Mrs. Brady, you can ride with her and I suggest that your husband drive to Hermann Hospital where they will be taking over her care. Mr. Brady, do you know how to get to the medical center and find Hermann?"

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded.

As he spoke, they began to hear the "thump, thump, thump" of a helicopter as it made its approach.

Unexpectedly, the nurse called Bo over to a quiet corner of the emergency room. "Mr. Brady, I'm a nurse and I despise malpractice cases, but something happened to Lucy that never should have occurred. You may need a lawyer. Years ago, I used to work at Parkland Hospital in Dallas with a nurse named Mildred Montgomery. She left there and moved to Palestine where she became a paralegal for a lawyer named Tisdale. I don't talk to her much any more, but she tells me that he's one of the best plaintiff lawyers in the country. In fact, he just handled a big asbestos case that's been all over the news lately. Here's her name

and phone number in Palestine and her boss's name. If it becomes necessary, call and tell her you're a friend of mine."

The nurse handed Bo a slip of paper that he stuck in his pocket and returned to Joanna.

"It's landing now," she continued. "We have a space marked off on the parking lot as a helipad where it will land. If you don't mind, I'd like for both of you to go out and stand under the carport entrance. There's nothing you can do here. You can observe from there."

The modern medical helicopter was one of the marvels of the late twentieth century. Initially developed by the military, it soon became a mainstay in nearly every major metropolitan area in the country. In Houston the Life Flight helicopters flew for Hermann Hospital, one of the major hospitals in the sprawling Texas medical center, located about five miles south of downtown. By the late nineties Hermann had three fully equipped helicopters that ranged throughout Southeast Texas twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Their nurses were among the most capable and experienced trauma professionals in the country. When the emergency called for it, a trauma surgeon often went along. Their pilots were the best in the business. Usually denied the luxury of setting down on a helipad, they had to drop their craft on narrow streets, in unlit forests with only the smallest of openings between swaying pine trees, among storm whipped electrical power lines or on crowded freeways. They flew in wind and driving rainstorms with lightning streaking the sky. Only hurricane-force gales would keep them on the ground.

John Peterson was the pilot of the helicopter dispatched to pick up Lucy. Undoubtedly the most skilled and dedicated on the Hermann Hospital crew, he was in his fifties and had been flying helicopters since Vietnam. Life Flight had been his passion for fifteen years. His kindly face featured blue eyes above a bushy graying mustache, giving him the appearance of a good-natured grandfather that belied the conviction he had for his job. It was about saving lives and if there was a need, he could put his helicopter down in an area not much wider than the blades that whipped above it. He looked out of the cockpit as the nurses opened the doors, dropped out of the helicopter and dashed for the girl on the stretcher in Texas City.

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The Life Flight nurses pushed a stretcher toward Lucy and two hospital nurses. They coordinated their efforts to transfer the patient and her IV bags of fluid, antibiotics and blood to the helicopter stretcher. Joanna and Bo watched with fear etching their faces until one of the nurses waved at Joanna to follow. She gave Bo a quick hug and ran toward the helicopter.

Bo turned to the parking lot, determined to be at the hospital by the time his daughter got to Hermann. As he reached his pickup, he glanced at the red pickup parked beside his and its license plate briefly caught his attention. The frame around the license read, "My Lawyer is J. Robert Tisdale." He paused long enough to pull the paper the nurse gave him from his pocket and, after comparing the names, he jumped into his pickup, backed out of the parking space and was soon out of sight.

Captain Peterson watched a scene similar to those he had witnessed so many times before, including the mother running along behind the stretcher and the father getting into a blue Ford pickup and speeding out of the parking lot. The nurses loaded the stretcher and patient, locked the wheels in place and directed Joanna to a jump seat. They were starting to hook up the various monitors when they gave Peterson the okay to take off. Checking to make sure that everything was clear, he radioed his base and lifted the chopper into the air, rapidly directing it toward the Gulf Freeway.

Between them, the nurses had more than forty years experience and they wasted no time in assessing the patient, determining that they needed immediate help on landing. The older of the two radioed Hermann, "We've got a seventeen-year-old female in severe distress; pulse thready at one-twenty; blood pressure of eighty over fifty; temp of one-hundred-four-point-five, even after antibiotics; respirations of thirty-two; on oxygen by mask; H and H are nine and twenty-five. She's being transfused and is on Ringers, Zosyn, Gentamycin and Clindamycin. Bleeding vaginally, she's in and out of consciousness. We need to ready an O.R. for immediate surgery. Preliminary diagnosis is complications of abortion, sepsis and possibly the beginning of DIC."

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After receiving an affirmative from the nurse at base, she turned to join in Lucy's care. Joanna understood most of the nurse's report, but DIC was something new.

"Excuse me, but what is DIC?" she asked over the thumping of the helicopter blades.

The nurse didn't pull any punches. "DIC stands for disseminated intravascular coagulopathy. It's a problem with the clotting factors in the blood that can be caused by many things, including sepsis and blood loss. If it can't be stopped, it can be fatal, but I hope we have your daughter on the way in time. The most important things are to keep blood products and the right antibiotics infusing while the doctors correct whatever is causing the problem. If the abortion caused it, a gynecologist will have to fix the underlying problem. We hope that the blood products and antibiotics will help her turn the corner."

The use of the word "fatal" shocked Joanna. Until that moment, she had never considered that her only daughter might die before she did. She expected to see Lucy married, to make her a grandmother. She couldn't picture herself crying at Lucy's funeral. She prayed harder than ever before, tears streaming down her face and sobs racking her body.

Up front, Captain Peterson was pushing the chopper toward Houston parallel to the Gulf Freeway when he spotted the father's pickup going at least ninety and being tailed by a police vehicle with lights flashing as they both weaved in and out of traffic. Seeing what was happening, he radioed the police dispatcher.

"Ann, one of your boys is chasing a blue pickup on the Gulf Freeway northbound. It looks like the number on the top of the patrol car is two eighty-three. The pickup is being driven by the father of a girl I've got in my chopper on the way to Hermann. It's a life or death situation. That pickup driver needs an escort, not a ticket."

"I hear you, John. I'll take care of it," Ann replied as she switched frequencies to radio Unit 283.

Peterson watched from above as within a minute Unit 283 moved over two lanes, put on a burst of speed to pass a truck and pulled in front of the pickup. It took Bo a moment to recognize that he now had an official escort and not a potential speeding ticket. Soon, he was following the police officer as he weaved in and out of traffic

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toward the downtown skyline, lights flashing and siren wailing. He would never see the look of satisfaction on Captain Peterson's face as the pilot veered from the freeway and angled over to the helipad adjacent to the hospital.

CHAPTER 10

J. Robert Tisdale left the throng inside the courthouse and lumbered to his fire-engine-red Dodge Ram pickup. It was the biggest and finest that Dodge made, a quad cab with dual wheels on the back and a giant diesel engine. A light rack rose above the cab and a roll bar extended to the truck bed. The lawyer had installed a big red box directly behind the cab. When the door to the box on the passenger side was unlocked, it revealed storage space for his briefcase, files and law books. On the driver's side the box contained a specially made refrigerator, fed from the battery but designed to keep beverages cold as long as the truck ran at least an hour a day. The lawyer dropped his briefcase in the right side box and walked around to the driver's side, unlocking the refrigerator to find his usual supply of Lone Star beer along with sodas for his grandchildren. He picked out a cold beer, popped the top and took a giant swig even though he was on the town square right in front of the courthouse. Letting forth a loud and long belch, he climbed into the cab and started the engine. As he drove from the courthouse, Lone Star in hand, he turned on a siren that pierced the town square. It could be heard for six blocks in any direction. J. Robert Tisdale had won another case, and he wanted everyone in town to know it.

He came into the world at the community hospital in Palestine, Texas, a small town about one hundred miles southeast of Dallas where his father worked for the railroad. His parents named him John Robert Tisdale, but as a small town boy from Texas, he quickly became Johnny Bob. His nickname, "Tank," came from his size. As a sophomore in

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high school, he was six feet, four inches tall and weighed two hundred and eighty pounds.

Until his senior year, Johnny Bob assumed he would work for the railroad after high school. College didn't enter his mind until the coach over at East Texas State in Tyler called, offering him a scholarship to play football. What the heck, Johnny Bob figured, might as well give college a try. Besides, it would postpone having to look for a job. Four years later, he completed his stay at East Texas State, graduating with a "C" average. After college, he moved back home and loafed for the summer, hanging out with his old friends and drinking beer. When August came, his dad announced that Johnny Bob either had to move out or start paying rent.

After receiving the ultimatum, Johnny Bob borrowed his dad's pickup and drove around town, thinking and weighing his options. Nothing interested him except the few big houses on a tree-shaded street where the rich people lived...the doctors, lawyers, railroad executives and a banker or two. He drove up and down that street half a dozen times before making his decision. He would be an attorney. He'd live in one of those big houses where he could sit out on a shaded veranda at the end of the day and drink a beer or whatever it was that rich lawyers drank when they got off work. How to become a lawyer was a question he could not answer.

The next day he wandered down to the courthouse and asked to see Judge Arbuckle, a lifelong resident of Palestine and an attorney for thirty years, the last ten of which he had served as the local district judge. A big supporter of Palestine High School football, he never missed a game and had followed Johnny Bob's athletic career since he played in junior high school.

After sitting uncomfortably in the outer office watching the secretary type on an old Underwood for twenty minutes, Johnny Bob amused himself by trying self-hypnosis, staring intently at the ceiling fan. Not exactly a candidate for hypnotism, he had dozed off when Judge Arbuckle opened the door to his chambers. A slight man with white hair, the judge radiated a no-nonsense personality, particularly when on the bench. Having no court duties that day, he wore a white short sleeve shirt and thin black tie. Mopping his brow with a red

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bandanna, the older man greeted his visitor with a smile. “Well, Tank, what brings you here? You’re not in trouble, are you?”

“No, sir,” Tank replied forcefully to emphasize his point as he rose from the chair. “I just need some advice.”

“Then come on into my office and let’s see how I can help you. Have a seat.”

Johnny Bob sat in a hard, straight-backed chair across from the judge’s desk as the older man walked around it and settled into a large, comfortable chair with a black leather seat. Behind him was an open window facing the courthouse square.

“Boy, it’s a hot one, ain’t it, son? I’ve been trying to get the commissioners to air condition this courthouse, but they won’t do it. Maybe the next time I have a three-week trial in July, I’ll subpoena every one of their fat asses and make them serve jury duty in that oven of a courtroom. Maybe that’ll do the trick. Meantime, I may just have to dig into my own pocket to buy a window unit for this office. How’re your mom and dad?”

“Just fine, sir.”

“You tell them I said hello. Now what do we need to talk about?”

Johnny Bob didn’t hesitate. “Sir, I want to be a lawyer and I don’t know how to do it.”

“Well, well, ain’t that just fine,” the judge chuckled. “Tank Tisdale for the defense. Not sure we have a courtroom in these parts big enough for you. Just kidding, son. How were your grades up at East Texas?”

Johnny Bob looked down at the floor as he responded, “Not very good, sir. I spent a lot of time playing football and most of my grades were ‘C’s’ with an occasional ‘B’.”

Judge Arbuckle spun around in his chair and stared out the window while he pondered a moment before he spoke. When he swiveled back around, he leveled with Tank. “Then, I suspect that the better law schools in the state, Texas, Baylor, S.M.U., are probably out. They require pretty good grades and a good score on the LSAT to get in. You even know what the LSAT is?”

“No, sir.”

“That’s the Law School Admission Test. All these damn schools are requiring it these days. Not like in my day when you just showed up on the first day of class, paid your fees and became a law student. There’s a law school down in Houston that’s probably your best choice. It’s called South Texas College of Law. It started in the basement of the YMCA and used to be strictly a night law school where people working full time could go and eventually become lawyers. It didn’t have much of a reputation for a lot of years but it’s improving and, from what I’ve seen, it has turned out some damn fine trial lawyers. It’s a private school, pretty expensive. You’d probably have to work in the daytime and go to school at night. Might take you an extra year.”

“That’s okay, sir. I can handle it.”

“Tell you what, Tank, the first step is that LSAT. I’ll have my secretary call and get the forms. When they arrive, you can get together with her and complete them. I suspect the test will be available sometime this fall and you might be able to get into school by January. That suit you?”

Johnny Bob almost climbed over the judge’s desk to shake his hand, saying, “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Two weeks later, with the help of the judge’s secretary, Johnny Bob completed the forms, and the following month he drove to Dallas where he took the test along with several hundred other lawyer hopefuls. In November, he got the results. While he didn’t quite understand everything that he read, it was clear that he scored in the bottom third of the examinees. When he took the results down to Judge Arbuckle, he was in for a disappointment. The judge looked over the test results and then looked up with a solemn expression.

“Son, I’m afraid this score and your college grades won’t get you into any law school in the state.” He could see the dismay on the face of the big old boy sitting across the desk.

“Well, sir, I guess I better get down to the railroad yard and try to get on there. I appreciate all that you did for me.” As he rose to leave, Judge Arbuckle stopped him.

“Tank, let me try one more thing. The dean down at South Texas is an old classmate of mine. Maybe with my recommendation,

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you could get in on probation. Hold on there a minute while I see if I can get him on the phone.”

The judge turned and thumbed through a Rolodex until he found the right number. When he got the dean on the phone, they exchanged pleasantries, talked about their families, kids, and grand kids, and then Judge Arbuckle got to the point. “Dick, I’ve got a young man sitting across from me. His name is Johnny Bob Tisdale. I’ve known him and his family all his life. He wants to be a lawyer but his college grades and LSAT, frankly, are piss-poor. If I gave you my solemn word that he’s willing to work his ass off to be a lawyer, would you let him in on probation for just one semester? If he doesn’t cut it, kick his butt all the way back up here to Palestine.”

After listening to the reply on the other end, he gave Johnny Bob a thumbs up, thanked the dean and hung up the phone. “You’re in, son. It’s probationary. If you don’t make it the first semester and every semester thereafter, you’re out on the street. I put my name on the line for you and I damn sure don’t want to be eating crow because of you. You start in two months. You best get on down to Houston, find yourself a job and get settled in. Classes start in January. You understand all that I’ve said?”

“Yes, sir, and I won’t let you down,” Johnny Bob replied as he circled the desk and came close to pulling Judge Arbuckle off his feet as he grabbed the judge’s right hand.

Johnny Bob moved to Houston in a matter of days. Unfortunately, Johnny Bob’s law school grades were no better than those he earned at East Texas. He managed to attend most classes, studied as much as he could with the work schedule that he had and scraped by. Other than passing his courses, his only law school accomplishment was placing second in a mock trial competition. He graduated in the four years Judge Arbuckle said that it would take. He was in the bottom quarter of his class, but he had a law school diploma. Three months after surviving the petrifying experience of the bar exam, he had a license to practice law.

After getting the results, Johnny Bob put on his best suit and started interviewing with the big firms in Houston. A waste of time. They took one look at his law school grades and decided that he wouldn’t make it in a major Houston law firm. He couldn’t compete

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with the top graduates of the best law schools hired by such firms. Besides, his East Texas redneck appearance and vocabulary would make it tough to sell any case to a jury.

After two months of job-hunting, Johnny Bob began to think that he had wasted four years, a lot of money and even more grief in law school. He was faced with staying where he was, working at a menial job. Tail between his legs, he drove home to Palestine to see if Judge Arbuckle had any ideas. After spending the weekend with his mom and dad, he showed up at the judge's office on Monday morning. It hadn't changed. Mable, the judge's loyal secretary, typed at the Underwood. The same uncomfortable chair. The same ceiling fan. He waited until the judge arrived. Arbuckle greeted him like a prodigal son.

"Tank, my boy, how goes life in the big city? Come on in."

Johnny Bob didn't waste time in getting to the point. He explained why he hadn't landed a job and asked for suggestions.

"Well, Tank, your timing may be just perfect. I'm retiring from the bench at the end of this year. My pension is enough to live on, but I enjoy the law and want to keep my hand in it. I've rented some space in the bank building across the street with an extra office. It's not much. I'll let you have it for nothing if you will help out on whatever business I bring in. I'll try to throw you some overflow when I can. It won't amount to much at first, but it's a start. Interested?"

Johnny Bob could not suppress a grin. "Judge, that's the best offer I've had so far. I'll take it. When can I move in?"

"Up to you, son. I've got three more months on my term, but the bank says the space is available and I can have it now."

A week later Johnny Bob moved some used furniture out of his old pickup and into the tiny back office on the third floor of the bank. His office was so small that his size filled it almost to capacity, but it was his and he was now a lawyer. Judge Arbuckle came over at lunch to see how he was doing. He found Johnny Bob hanging his law license on the wall behind the desk.

"Well, Tank, looks like you're settling in. Mable will start moving my stuff over here little by little. In the meantime, if you have anything for her to type, just ask. Now we're going to need to put our

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names on the hallway door, mine on top, of course. How do you want yours to read? John Tisdale? Johnny Bob Tisdale?”

“No, sir. I’ve been thinking about that. I’m a professional man now, and people in this town need to know that old Johnny Bob is now an attorney. They may still call me Johnny Bob or Tank, but from now on they need to know that my professional name is J. Robert Tisdale, Attorney at Law.”

So it was. The judge arranged for the bank’s painter to put the two names in gold on the glass-paneled door: “Arthur ‘Buck’ Arbuckle and J. Robert Tisdale, Attorneys and Counselors at Law.” When the painter finished, Johnny Bob sat on the floor outside the door and stared at the sign for an hour.

From that day forward he never introduced himself as Johnny Bob again. It was always J. Robert Tisdale. When he appeared before a judge, it was “Your Honor, J. Robert Tisdale for the plaintiff.” When he met a client for the first time, it was “Name’s J. Robert Tisdale. Pleased to meet you.” Even when he met his future wife, he handed her his card and said, “I’m J. Robert Tisdale, attorney at law.”

After he moved in, he put an ad in the local newspaper:

J. Robert Tisdale
Attorney And Counselor At Law
Is Pleased To Announce
The Opening Of His Office For
The Practice Of Law
Palestine State Bank Bldg.
Phone: 868 5562
Palestine, Texas

On the day after the ad ran, Johnny Bob arrived early, wearing his best suit, white shirt and tie, halfway expecting people to be lined up out in the hallway. It was deserted. The young lawyer waited around until late morning, convinced that the phone was going to ring any minute. Instead, all he heard was the sound of silence. Having nothing better to do, he crossed the street to the courthouse and found the

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judge arraigning prisoners who had been arrested over the past couple of days.

As Johnny Bob took a seat in the courtroom, now in one of the chairs in front of the rail with the other lawyers, Judge Arbuckle called the name of the next prisoner, a skinny, middle-aged man dressed in jeans and a dirty white tee shirt. He pled not guilty to a charge of theft. Johnny Bob saw the judge looking at him before returning his gaze to the prisoner.

“Well, sir, can you afford a lawyer?”

The prisoner put on his most pitiful expression and replied, “No, Judge, I ain’t got enough to feed my family. I cut timber for a living when the weather’s good and we been havin’ too much rain lately.”

“Then, sir, I’m going to appoint one of the finest young lawyers in this part of the country to represent you. Mr. Tisdale, would you approach the bench?”

Thus began the legal career of one J. Robert Tisdale, Attorney at Law.

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Johnny Bob paused for effect. “Dr. Kriegel, just how certain are you of the opinions that you have just offered?”

“Let me stress that these are hardly opinions. They are scientific fact. As to how certain, Mr. Tisdale, just as I am certain that I came from my mother’s womb, am I certain that at the moment of conception, a man or woman is a human being.”

Johnny Bob looked at Claudia who nodded her head, confirming that he had accomplished what he had planned with this witness. “Pass the witness, Your Honor.”

Tod didn’t even wait for the judge to acknowledge it was his turn. As Tod rose from his chair, Wayne reached into his briefcase and took out a small white bowl and placed it on the front of their counsel table. Johnny Bob, Claudia and several jurors noticed what Wayne was doing, but could only wonder what Tod would do next. Having studied Dr. Kriegel, Tod anticipated the strength of his testimony. He had to do something to grab the attention of the jury. As he moved around the counsel table and stood between it and the witness, he removed an object from his coat pocket. It was soon apparent to the judge, the jury, the attorneys and everyone watching on television that he had an egg in his hand. Without saying a word, he held the egg between his thumb and forefinger, then closed his palm around it and squeezed. As the egg shattered and dripped from his hand into the bowl, he asked, “Tell me, Dr. Kriegel, have I just crushed an egg? Or, have I killed a chicken?”