

Cowboy To Courtroom

Billy Strickland

[Prologue] You Do the Work

I'll tell you a story. I was still a new lawyer. I took quite a few civil cases (I won my first case four months into the practice) and more criminal cases than I liked. I was highly effective at both. I do not mean that boastfully. I mean that I did the homework; I went to court prepared, and it didn't matter how well-dressed, well-spoken, or sly the other attorney was—I *never* backed down. Judges called me “the bulldog” (or other, less flattering titles), while other lawyers referred clients to me with the advice, “You want someone who’s going to fight relentlessly for you; that’s Billy Strickland.”

When I first started practicing, I had a Department of Social Services (DSS) case that I will never forget. When I walked into the courtroom, the district court judge said, “Mr. Strickland, there’s your client. Be back after lunch and be ready.” In those next few hours, I conferred with my client, and I completed a fury of research over a skipped lunch, enough to break a good sweat. I was back in court with my client at two o’clock.

“Are you ready to go?” the judge asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“All right. Is there anything preliminary that needs to be handled?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’d like to make a motion to dismiss.”

She blinked. “*Excuse me?*”

I said, “I have a motion to dismiss.”

“On what grounds?”

“The Uniform Child Protection Act. The federal act.”

It got quiet.

“What do you mean?” the judge asked.

I gestured at my client and said, “This particular lady and her child have not been here six months. They’re military. Without being here six months, this has not been established as their home state. The home state has jurisdiction. You do not.”

“*What?*”

My hand went up with a printout of the law in it. “Here it is.”

That got her eyebrows up. “*Mr.* Strickland, to be sure, if I *needed* to have jurisdiction over a case, I could get it.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” And I handed her printouts of cases in which a judge had done just that. “Here’s one on the grounds of alleged sexual abuse. Here’s one on the grounds of alleged physical abuse. In examples like these, you have emergency jurisdiction to hear the case. Outside of that, you do not.”

“I *have* jurisdiction.”

“No, ma’am, you have no more jurisdiction than Cuba to hear this case, and I move to dismiss.”

You could have heard a pin drop in that entire courthouse. That silence was louder than a shout. I had never seen a judge so taken aback.

Later, in the back room, the other attorneys shook their heads. “Billy, I never thought of that,” more than one of them said.

And that took *me* aback. It still does. Didn’t they practice law? What did they *mean* they’d never thought about that? That’s the first thing you do, the first work you put into a case.

The first item I teach the young attorneys who work for me today is subject matter jurisdiction. In other words, why does this judge and this court have control over my body? Prove to me that you have control over my body, and then we’ll argue the case; then we’ll talk about its merits. But until then, I don’t want to listen to you. Verifying jurisdiction up front has saved a lot of cases.

Most people don’t want to put in the work, or even if they do, they back down when things get hard. Doing the homework and then not backing down once you’ve *done* the homework is what makes the difference between a mediocre lawyer and a good lawyer. More than that, doing the work and not backing down once you’ve done it is what makes all the difference in every effort in life that matters. This comes at a cost. Others may call you arrogant or too self-confident, but that is not the criticism that people take it to be. This world beat the lesson into me at a young age that if you are not confident, the world will *eat* you.

I did not have an ideal childhood or anything that resembled one. And I didn’t come into this life blessed with an abundance of funds or with an abundance of opportunity. I had maybe a bit of good luck and a mentor to look out for me, but I encountered a lot of absolutely terrible luck too. The start I got on life was tough, as the chapters ahead of you will reveal. That is one reason I have always cared so deeply about cases defending juveniles and why I still love those

cases the most. I look across at my client, and I think, *There, but for the grace of God, go I. That young man could have been Billy Strickland.*

Any insights you'll read in this book have not been easily won, and they have been earned at the school of hard knocks. Today, I own a successful law practice, I am active in politics, and besides my residence, I hold a considerable portfolio of real estate. That makes mine a rags-to-riches story, but I didn't find any shortcut to get there. Nobody pulled up to my parents' place before midnight to drop off a pair of glass shoes and a pumpkin on wheels to speed me to the palace and a date with destiny. Not nearly. At fourteen, I fled home on a Greyhound bus with only a plastic bag full of clothes on the seat beside me and a buck deer head on my lap, and I spent the next few years working odd jobs at ranches or fixing trucks and Harleys. I squandered time riding bulls and chasing girls. But in the years since, I've set goals and achieved them, and I did that because I put in the *work*.

Life is like that courtroom. You can't get distracted by what others are doing or by what they're saying about you; you have to focus on the work. It doesn't matter if that means skipping lunch, working late nights and three jobs, or going without heat and central air to save on the utilities. These are things I've done. Whether I have before me the work of discipleship, the work of parenting, the work of business, or any other good work, in this world, there is no substitution for *doing the work* and *doing right*. In the pursuit of success in business and success in most things in life, those are the only two things that matter.

This book is my story about doing the work. The chapters ahead are what I have to share. Come give it a read; it's quite a ride, and it'll be worth your time.