

Pro Se Judgment: Winning Your Case Without a Lawyer

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Introduction

In the labyrinthine world of modern justice, where towering legal fees often bar the doors to the courthouse for everyday people, a quiet revolution is unfolding. As of November 2025, artificial intelligence has not only become a digital ally for the underdog but has permeated the legal industry at an unprecedented scale.

According to the American Bar Association's 2025 Legal Industry Report, over 2,800 surveyed professionals reported AI adoption surging from 22% in prior years to a staggering 80%, with benefits

including increased productivity (53% of firms) and cost savings (42%). Tools like Gemini Pro, once experimental, are now integral to tasks such as contract review, document summarization, and even drafting briefs, as highlighted in reports from firms like Akerman LLP and NetDocuments. This novella weaves together a tapestry of fictional narratives inspired by the transformative potential of such AI tools, showcasing ordinary heroes who confront extraordinary legal battles armed only with curiosity, perseverance, and a glowing screen.

From custody disputes to environmental crusades, these stories illuminate the triumphs and pitfalls of self-representation in a system designed for professionals. They celebrate the democratization of law, where complex statutes and precedents are distilled into actionable insights—faster contract drafting and smarter case management, as noted in Callidus AI's 2025 analysis. Yet, amid the promise, perils loom: ethical concerns over AI-generated errors in court filings have led to "vigilante lawyers" exposing "AI slop," as reported by The New York Times on November 7, 2025, with 61% of lawyers using AI but 77% worried about cyber threats reshaping risks, per Artificial Lawyer's November 13, 2025, article. Florida's Bar Guide to Getting Started with AI (July 28, 2025) underscores the need for caution, emphasizing verification to avoid hallucinations or biases.

These narratives also serve as a cautionary reminder: AI is a guide, not a guarantee. Always cross-verify its suggestions against official sources, for the law is a living entity, shaped by human judgment and ever-evolving rulings—witness the failed attempts to broaden AI regulations in various states this year. As you turn these pages, may you find inspiration in the resilience of the human spirit, amplified by the ingenuity of technology that has turned legal

practice on its head. Reflect on how justice might one day be truly accessible to all, especially as corporate legal departments deploy AI self-service portals (Akerman LLP, June 23, 2025) and the industry grapples with reputations at risk from AI-driven cyber threats. In this era, the underdog no longer fights alone; the digital revolution levels the field, but wisdom must guide its use.

The stories herein draw from the real-world explosion of AI in law, where firms anticipate transformative changes in 2025, from ethical guidelines to combating misuse. They are works of fiction, but rooted in the possibilities and warnings of our time—empowering individuals while urging vigilance against overreliance. Welcome to a future where knowledge is democratized, but human oversight remains paramount.

Chapter 1: The Custody Crusader

Arvind Singh slumped in his home office, the only light a harsh, blue-white cone from his monitor, carving him out of the 2:00 AM darkness. The silence of his small Seattle home was absolute, save for the dull, rhythmic click-clack of his mechanical keyboard and the soft, anxious whir of the computer's fan. Outside, the world was asleep, but here, the air was thick with the stale, acidic scent of day-old coffee and the faint, dusty smell of printer paper. The glow illuminated stacks of stark-white legal forms and notes crumpled into grey balls of frustration. It was late 2024, and the custody battle that had simmered for seven years was finally at a rolling boil. As a health physicist at a nuclear site, Arvind's days were a world of sterile, fluorescent-lit labs, beeping dosimeters, and the precise, angular language of radiation calculations. This—the murky, emotionally-charged swamp of family law—was utterly alien. His ex-partner, the mother of their young son, had a history of volatility, a fact underscored by pre-existing assault charges that

hung in the air like the metallic tang of ozone before a storm. Under Washington law, RCW 26.09.191 created limitations on parenting plans where a parent had a history of domestic violence or assault, establishing a rebuttable presumption against unrestricted residential time if such acts were proven. Arvind knew this could be pivotal, but navigating it alone felt like defusing a bomb without tools. Taped to the edge of his monitor was a bright, crayon-yellow drawing of a sun, a treasured piece of art from his son. It was a stark, cheerful contrast to the dense black text scrolling on his screen. Seven years prior, \$3,000 had vanished into a lawyer's retainer, only for him to reclaim it during a brief, hopeful reconciliation. That hope had fractured 3.5 years later, dissolving into a year of informal, text-message skirmishes over parental rights. Now, needing a formal parenting plan—what Washington state called a custody order under RCW 26.09.184—he faced a chasm: financial ruin with a lawyer, or the terrifying abyss of going it alone. The plan had to outline residential schedules, decision-making authority, and dispute resolution, all centered on the child's best interests as per RCW 26.09.187, which listed factors like each parent's relationship with the child, emotional needs, and any history of abuse. That's when he typed his first, hesitant query into Gemini Pro. The blinking black cursor on the white screen seemed to mock him. "Explain parenting plans in Washington state." The response was instantaneous. A cascade of clean, organized text filled the screen, dissecting RCW 26.09. The digital hum of the AI felt like a hand on his shoulder. It explained that permanent parenting plans must include residential provisions, allocation of decision-making, and methods for resolving disputes, with mandatory limitations if a parent had committed acts of domestic violence under RCW 26.09.191. Emboldened, he dove deeper, the clicking of his keys growing more confident. "What factors does the court consider in custody determinations under RCW 26.09.187?"

The AI listed seven key criteria: the relative strength of each parent's relationship with the child, agreements between parties, past parenting performance, emotional and developmental needs, stability, sibling relationships, and the child's wishes if mature enough. It warned of discretionary limitations for issues like assault history. "Help me draft a petition for a parenting plan, including provisions for a parent with assault history." The AI generated a template, suggesting supervised visitation under RCW 26.09.191 if assault charges involved family members, tied to counseling or anger management. Arvind printed it, the hot ink smell filling the room, but he wasn't done. He refined: "Incorporate rebuttable presumption against residential time for domestic violence per RCW 26.09.192." The updated draft included language for rebutting the presumption with evidence of rehabilitation. For two years, the AI became his nocturnal collaborator. The smell of hot ink from his cheap printer, churning out drafts at 3:00 AM, filled the house. He'd upload redacted documents, the faint, buzzing sound of his scanner cutting the silence. Gemini Pro analyzed them, suggesting logical provisions like supervised visitation tied to counseling. It taught him court rules—CR 7 for pleadings, CR 4.1 for domestic relations process, and local King County filings via the e-filing portal, requiring electronic submission for most documents. "Explain venue under RCW 26.09.280," he queried, learning actions could be filed where the child resided. The work was a grind. He learned to spot hallucinations—fabricated cases that sounded real—with a jolt of cold adrenaline. One night, the AI cited a non-existent "In re Marriage of Singh" case; Arvind cross-verified on the Washington State Courts portal, scratching notes on a legal pad. He browsed official sites, confirming recent case law like *State v. Wierson* (2025), which touched on child safety in assault contexts, and Hodgson Law's insights on criminal records impacting custody. "Role-play as my ex's lawyer," he'd type, his heart thumping as he