

FORGED

**A FAMILY, A FABRICATOR AND
A FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE**



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Preface

Writing a business book in 2025 feels a bit like trying to sell umbrellas in a monsoon — there's certainly demand, but the market is already flooded. With so many frameworks, gurus, and AI-powered idea generators out there, one has to ask: *"What could I possibly add to the conversation?"*

It's a fair question. And the answer, I believe, lies not in novelty for its own sake, but in lived experience — the kind that can't be Googled, downloaded, or ChatGPT'd. The kind earned one painful lesson at a time.

This book is drawn from my own decades in business: the wins, the wipeouts, and the moments in between where you're not quite sure which is which. It also draws on the countless insights I've shamelessly borrowed (or, if is that "assimilated") from others — be they mentors, authors, or the many brave souls who've let me poke around in their business.

More than that, though, this book is driven by something personal. I grew up as the child of a failed business owner. When I was eleven, in the middle of winter in 1972, our family found ourselves living in a car after the bank foreclosed. It was in the middle of the OPEC oil crisis. But for us, the real crisis was a lack of cash and an abundance of heartbreak. My father wasn't a bad man — he just didn't have the tools, support, or know-how to make his business work. And it cost us dearly. The financial strain may not have ended my parents' marriage, but it certainly felt like that.

Over the years, I've noticed a trend: marriages and partnerships are far more likely to fall apart from a lack of money than a lack of love. That insight, more than any textbook, has shaped the way I see business and life.

I've had my own brush with financial ruin — we bought into a business during the Global Financial Crisis and turned it around from a -9.5% net profit to a measly 1% profit within a few months, only to discover I'd picked the wrong business partner. The due diligence I did on the business was solid. On the partner? Not so much. After years of legal battles and courtroom victories, he declared bankruptcy and exited stage left, leaving me with the bill. As usual, the only clear winners were the lawyers.

That episode forced me to resurrect my consulting career — reluctantly and hesitatingly at first, but ultimately with purpose. In helping others rebuild, I began to rebuild myself. I started to see not just what makes businesses tick, but what makes them resilient. Not just how to grow, but how to grow well.

Today, I work with businesses that want more than survival. They want clarity. They want structure. They want a culture worth showing up for and cash flow that lets them sleep at night. And that's exactly what this book is about.

At its core, this fable isn't just about turning a business around — it's about what happens when you bring focus to cash, culture, and leadership. These are the pillars of a thriving business, and they've been proven not only by theory but by trial, error, and the occasional small miracle.

If you're a business owner or leader looking for something practical, grounded, and occasionally irreverent, then welcome. You're in the right place. I hope this book gives you not just ideas, but hope.

And to my wife Marlene, who's stood beside me for 39 years through all the mess and magic — this one's for you.

Charles Barnard
NSW, 2025

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Monday Morning Wake-Up Call

7:00 AM. Monday.

Traffic was thick. Not catastrophic, just your standard-issue Monday morning grind – dense enough to annoy, not enough to justify turning back. Kevin sat quietly, sipping lukewarm coffee from a battered travel mug, staring out at the sea of brake lights stretching ahead like a slow-moving lava flow.

Then, out of nowhere, a black Ute cut in front of him. P-plated. Naturally. Kevin bristled for a moment but caught himself with a wry smile. “Of course,” he muttered. “Black Ute with green P plates. If you want to get somewhere fast, follow one of *those*.”

And so he did.

The Ute weaved, darted, and danced its way through traffic like it had a personal vendetta against time itself. Kevin, ever the conservative driver, found himself keeping pace – something he wouldn’t normally do, but strangely, it worked. The kid in the Ute was somehow carving a cleaner path than his WAZE ever managed.

“Unexpected, but welcome,” Kevin thought. Then, with a knowing smirk, *“That’s been the story of my life, hasn’t it? Following odd paths to the right places – just never quite the way the textbooks suggest.”*

He arrived precisely on time – an increasingly rare achievement in Sydney traffic – and parked outside the premises of *Integrity Fabrication*. A squat, functional building. Practical but tired. The kind of place that had once looked modern but now wore its age like an old boiler suit – still working, but frayed at the edges.

Kevin sat in the car for a moment, looking out at his new client's business. He was here as interim General Manager, parachuted in with a brief that read something like: *turn it around, build something new, mentor the owners, and work yourself out of a job*. A turnaround project, sure. But this one already felt different.

It had that unsettling air of familiarity.

Integrity Fabrication was run by siblings – Niko, Dianne, and Pete – who'd inherited both the business and the operating manual their father wrote (figuratively, if not literally) sometime in 1980. Unfortunately, they were still using it, blissfully unaware that the world – and the market – had moved on. By about two decades.

Everything about the place felt dated. Not quite “retro cool,” more “we missed a few memos.” Clients were drifting, margins were vanishing, and the cash? Well, let's just say it was flowing in the wrong direction.

Kevin had seen it all before. More than once. And not just in other people's businesses.

“This one's going to be personal,” he thought.

He understood their confusion – the sting of watching something that *should* work slowly unravel. He'd lived it. But he also knew that there was a path out, if you were willing to challenge assumptions and embrace a bit of discomfort.

Cash. Culture. Leadership.

That's what turns a business around. Not always in that order, but never without all three.

Time to go in. Time to start untangling the mess.

Kevin stepped through the front door, greeted not by a receptionist but by a quiet, stale stillness – and the unmistakable scent of long-forgotten printer toner.

The reception area had clearly retired years ago but hadn't told anyone. The desk was more storage unit than workspace, buried under a landslide of old paperwork, yellowing invoices, and what looked suspiciously like a dot matrix printer that had last seen action during the GST rollout.

He glanced at the unplugged monitor on the desk. VGA port. Impressive – archaeological, almost.

And then there was the dust. It clung to every surface like it paid rent.

Looking around, Kevin clocked something important. This wasn't just a business in financial trouble – there was a hoarder in the building. Possibly more than one. Shelves groaned under the weight of obsolete tech, broken gadgets, and boxes of who-knows-what. The kind of things people kept just in case. The case never came.

He was still taking it all in when a woman emerged from the corridor. Tidy blouse, tired eyes. Probably late forties, though her expression added a few extra years. She looked at him cautiously, clipboard in hand like a shield.

"You must be Dianne," Kevin said, stepping forward with a warm, steady tone.

She nodded. "Uh-huh."

Not quite frosty, but not rolling out the welcome mat either.

Just then, a younger man walked in – taller, slightly dishevelled but with more energy in his step.

"I'm Niko Patnikos – Joe's son," he said, offering a handshake. "You're Kevin Wysleier, right?"

"That's me."

Kevin looked between the two siblings. If Dianne was the sceptic, Niko seemed the pragmatist. No sign yet of the third one — Pete.

“Where’s your brother?” Kevin asked.

“Down in the workshop,” Niko replied. “You’ll meet him soon. He’s... hands-on.”

Kevin nodded, trying not to make assumptions too early. He’d learned that lesson the hard way.

“Cup of tea?” Dianne offered flatly.

Kevin’s eyes flicked to the kitchen behind her. A cockroach trap sat brazenly on the counter next to an open tin of instant coffee. Near the bin, two more cans of roach spray kept guard.

“Thanks, but I’m right for now,” he said, politely declining what he feared might be a hot cup of regret.

“Alright then,” said Niko, gesturing towards the rear. “Let’s take a walk. You’ll want to see what you’ve got yourself into.”

As Kevin followed Niko deeper into the factory, he couldn’t help but feel he’d stepped through some sort of industrial time warp — part early 2000s, part post-apocalyptic garage sale.

The hammering had stopped, but the echo remained, bouncing off the corrugated walls like a ghost that hadn’t realised the job was done. Dust hung in the air like seasoning — every surface looked lightly breadcrumbed in grey.

Niko gestured towards a man hunched over a workbench, mid-tap on a stubborn metal sheet.

“That’s Pete. He’ll walk you through the operations side.”

Pete looked up briefly, squinted, and gave Kevin the sort of nod one might offer a stranger at a funeral — polite, cautious, and not particularly hopeful.

Kevin extended a hand. "Good to meet you, Pete. I'm Kevin. Here to help right the ship."

Pete blinked. "Which ship?"

Kevin smiled. "The one that's currently taking on water."

Pete stared blankly for a second, then returned to his hammering without a word.

"Right then." Kevin thought.

The tour continued.

It didn't take long to connect the dots. The broken fan in the corner. The ancient duct crimping machine missing its side guard. The workbench supported by milk crates and hope. Pete, it seemed, wasn't just the workshop supervisor — he was the unofficial Minister of Salvage. Every item, no matter how obsolete, had been kept. Just in case.

Kevin crouched near a pile of cracked toolboxes and glanced at a long-forgotten plasma cutter — missing a nozzle, wrapped in frayed electrical tape, and balancing precariously on a coil of old extension leads. He didn't dare ask if it still worked. He already knew the answer.

"It's not broken," Pete offered, unprompted. "It just needs a bit of love."

Kevin nodded thoughtfully. And about three grand in parts and a signed safety waiver, he didn't say.

When they reached the corner of the shop, Kevin spotted the beading machine. It looked like it had once been magnificent, perhaps back in the Howard era. Now it sat slightly cock-eyed, one leg on a piece of MDF, the locking mechanism clearly missing.

"Is this machine in use?" Kevin asked.

“Yeah,” said Pete. “The rollers just happen to be spaced right, so it’s fine.”

Kevin blinked. “So... no adjustments then?”

Pete shrugged. “Not needed. It’s already set to what we use.”

Kevin inhaled through his nose, slowly. If WorkSafe ever popped in unannounced, they’d have a field day – and possibly a minor heart attack. Tech screws poked skywards like caltrops, bits of insulation drifted across the floor like fibreglass tumbleweeds, and there wasn’t a fire extinguisher in sight that didn’t look like it dated back to Y2K.

But beneath the clutter and chaos, Kevin could feel something else – something harder to define. A kind of stubborn loyalty to the way things had always been. Not laziness, exactly. More like inertia with a side of sentimentality.

The business wasn’t just rusty. It was stuck.

“Well,” Kevin said quietly to himself as Niko and Pete walked ahead, “we’ve got work to do.”

This wasn’t going to be a quick fix. But then again, few things worth saving ever are.

Numbers don't lie.

Back in the office, Kevin dusted off a chair, took out his notebook, and leaned forward with the kind of posture that said: *Right then. Enough sightseeing. Let's get into it.*

"Alright," he said, looking at the trio seated around the old boardroom table, "time to get down to business."

Dianne looked up warily from her laptop. Niko leaned back in his chair, arms folded. The remnants of someone's half-eaten biscuit sat on a plate by the window, untouched for what looked like several days.

"When was the last time you did a Power of One analysis on your financials?" Kevin asked, keeping his tone even.

Dianne frowned slightly. "Power of what?"

Kevin smiled. He'd been expecting that. "Power of One. It's a quick diagnostic. We look at six key numbers — three from your P&L, three from your balance sheet. Doesn't take long, and it shows us where the real leverage points are hiding."

He scribbled as he spoke:

- **Top line revenue**
- **Cost of goods sold** (or just gross margin, depending on your preference)
- **Overheads**
- **Accounts payable days**
- **Accounts receivable value**
- **Inventory levels**

"With just these, we can quickly model what happens if we improve each of them by just 1% or one day. It gives us a clear line of sight into where the effort will actually move the dial — for both profit *and* cash."

Niko raised a brow. "Aren't profit and cash basically the same thing?"

Kevin turned to him with a half-smile. "If only. I'm guessing you've had moments where the accountant says you've made a profit, but you look at the bank account and think—*funny, no one told the cash that.*"

Niko nodded slowly. "Too many times."

Kevin continued, "There's a saying I live by: *Revenue is vanity, profit is sanity, cash is reality.* And until we look at the numbers properly, we're just flying blind and calling it strategy."

He let the words settle, then asked, "Do you have your latest financials close at hand?"

Dianne shifted in her chair. "Not really," she admitted. "We've still got a few things to finalise from last year. The accountant's waiting on us before he can do the statements."

"Alright," Kevin said, nodding. "Not ideal, but let's not let perfect be the enemy of progress. Have you got the management accounts at least?"

"I do the books," Dianne replied, defensively. "But there are still some things I need to post and reconcile. That's why the accountant's waiting on me."

Kevin paused. Time for a gentle but firm nudge.

"Then I'd say that's Task One. How quickly can you get them into shape?"

"If I drop everything," she said, glancing sideways at Niko, "maybe by the end of the day. But I *am* busy. And honestly, it's just admin. Surely it can wait?"

Kevin didn't blink. "Dianne," he said carefully, "I want you to think of your bookkeeping as keeping score."

She tilted her head slightly – not quite convinced.

"We wouldn't watch a game of soccer, cricket, or netball without knowing the score. Someone keeps tally in real-time – because otherwise, how would we know who's winning?"

He leaned in, his tone kind but deliberate.

"It's the same here. Keeping the score doesn't fix everything – but it tells us where to look. And if we want to win, we have to start there. What would it take to have that ready today?"

There was a pause. Dianne didn't answer straight away, but her expression shifted. Less resistance. More consideration. The door wasn't open yet – but maybe it was starting to unlock.

Kevin didn't press further. He knew enough to let the seed settle.

Kevin stood and scanned the room.

"Do you have a whiteboard?" he asked.

Niko pointed to the corner of the room. "There's one there – somewhere behind the filing cabinet."

Kevin walked over and gently tugged it free, along with an equally ancient flip chart stand. The board creaked as it moved, shedding a fine mist of dust that sparkled momentarily in the fluorescent light.

He gave it a wipe with the cuff of his sleeve and found a marker – dry. Tried another – miraculously, it worked.

"Right," he said, sketching a basic box model on the board.

1. Revenue ↑ 1%
2. Cost of Goods ↓ 1%
3. Overheads ↓ 1%
4. Accounts Receivable ↓ 1 day
5. Accounts Payable ↑ 1 day
6. Inventory ↓ 1day

Kevin turned back to the group.

“These are your levers,” he said. “And the beauty is—you don’t have to pull them all at once. Just one small change in any of these areas has a measurable impact. Stack a few together, and suddenly the picture looks very different.”

Niko frowned slightly. “So, we just shift things by one percent or one day... and it makes a real difference?”

Kevin nodded. “Absolutely. The magic isn’t in the number. It’s in the *compounding*. Think of it like tuning a guitar—tighten each string just a touch, and suddenly the whole thing sounds better.”

He turned back to the board and started plugging in rough numbers, based on the few they’d discussed earlier and some ballpark assumptions.

“Let’s say your revenue is \$2 million,” he said, writing it down. “1% increase? That’s an extra \$20,000.”

Next, he adjusted cost of goods sold—just 1% more margin.

“That’s another \$15,000. Overheads trimmed by 1%? Say, \$10,000 saved.”

Then he moved to working capital:

“Accounts receivable – bring that in by just one day, and that’s maybe \$5,000 in the bank sooner. Push payables out by a day, that’s another \$4,000 buffer. Trim the inventory? Free up \$10,000 of cash just sitting on your shelves collecting dust.”

He circled the total:

Potential impact: \$64,000+

...without hiring anyone, launching anything, or running a single ad.

Niko let out a low whistle.

Dianne looked at the numbers, then up at Kevin. “We’ve been trying to fix everything at once.”

“Exactly,” Kevin replied. “But sometimes the real work is quieter than that. It’s not heroic. It’s just... focused.”

He capped the marker and placed it down. “The Power of One isn’t glamorous. But it’s reliable. And in a business like this, reliable is how we start the turnaround.”

He could see it now — both of them beginning to shift, just slightly. Not convinced yet. But less resistant. Curious.

And curiosity, Kevin knew, was the first sign of change.

There was a long pause after Kevin capped the marker. Dianne stared at the whiteboard, lips slightly pursed, weighing the numbers like someone mentally running her fingers over a set of cracked rosary beads.

Then, with a sigh that was equal parts resignation and reluctant responsibility, she stood up.

“Alright,” she said. “Give me a minute. I’ll see what I can pull together.”

Kevin didn't say anything — just gave a slight nod of acknowledgment. He knew better than to celebrate too early. Small wins are often silent.

She disappeared down the hallway, and he heard drawers opening, followed by the unmistakable sound of a file cabinet protesting years of overuse. A few muttered curses drifted back toward the boardroom — nothing too creative, just your standard issue *paperwork expletives*.

After ten minutes, she returned with a manila folder, a spiral-bound notebook, and a laptop that looked like it had seen active duty.

"Here's what I've got," she said, setting them down. "Don't expect it to be perfect. There's a couple of gaps and a few bank feeds that haven't reconciled yet. But it'll give you the general picture."

Kevin sat, gently opened the folder, and began flipping through the pages.

The numbers were rough. But usable. Like scaffolding — it wobbled, but you could build on it.

As he scanned, Dianne hovered nearby, arms crossed. "I usually tidy this up before anyone else sees it," she said. "But we've been behind. I do what I can."

Kevin looked up, not with judgment but with quiet appreciation. "You've done more than most," he said. "And the fact you've got this much ready — today — that tells me you care more than you let on."

She gave him a quick glance, half sceptical, half surprised. "Well, someone's got to."

Kevin turned the page and began pencilling figures into the framework he'd drawn earlier on the flip chart. "Then I'd say you're exactly the person we need to help lead this."

Dianne said nothing, but her posture shifted — just a little. Less arms-crossed. More open.

Kevin kept going, gently explaining as he worked through the margins, the trends, the signs of ageing debtors and bulging inventory lines. Dianne stayed with him, asking the occasional question. Some sharp, some unsure — but all real.

By the end of the hour, there was a basic Power of One model taking shape on the board, and a handful of notes scribbled in Dianne's once-pristine notebook.

"This isn't the solution," Kevin said, sitting back. "But it's the start. And that's more than we had this morning."

Dianne looked down at the pages in front of her. "It actually makes sense now," she murmured. "It's not just numbers. It's... decisions."

Kevin smiled. "Exactly."

The real issue

The sun was already low as Kevin merged onto the highway, the Ute humming steadily beneath him. The day had left a weight on his shoulders – not heavy, but dense. The kind that doesn't fade with a good coffee or a brisk walk.

He tapped the steering wheel lightly, eyes on the road but mind somewhere else.

"What a day..." he muttered to himself.

On paper, it was a textbook turnaround job: sales were low, margins even lower, and profitability hanging on by a thread. That was the obvious part – the kind of problem you could point to on a spreadsheet.

But this one ran deeper.

Niko and Dianne were clearly trying. You could see it in the furrowed brows, the constant movement, the 'always just catching up' energy. But they were also overwhelmed – running on fumes, making reactive decisions, patching cracks with tape instead of mortar. There was no breathing space. Just survival.

And that survival mindset was contagious.

The shop floor was a physical manifestation of it. Dirty. Disorganised. No pride in the space, and it showed. No one had the energy – or the authority – to say, "This isn't good enough."

Pete, for all his technical ability, wasn't capable of leading. Not through neglect – just not wired that way. But the effect was the same. No clear direction. No standards. No spark.

And the equipment... Kevin winced just thinking about it. Held together by hope, duct tape, and a vague memory of how it used to work. Preventative maintenance? Non-existent. Everything was reactive, late, and poorly done. The clutter alone was costing them capacity – machines blocked in, work areas jammed, paths through the factory that resembled obstacle courses.

"It's like trying to run a marathon with your shoelaces tied together," Kevin thought.

Externally, things weren't much better. The market had shifted, sure – but not enough to justify how far behind they were. With their market share as small as it was, they should've been nimble. But instead, they were... inert.

Marketing? Virtually non-existent. No emails. No calls to past clients. No follow-up. No front foot.

And sales? A series of small, low-value jobs that barely kept the lights on. Work that felt more like charity than commerce. It was hand-to-mouth stuff – and that mindset had seeped into the team. There was no sense of aspiration. No ambition. Just 'get it out the door and hope they pay.'

The Power of One exercise had confirmed what Kevin suspected: the biggest levers were pricing and margin. Volume would help, of course – but only if it was the *right* kind. Not more of the same. That path only led to busy fools and empty bank accounts.

No one seemed to know who the ideal clients were. Or the ideal projects. There was no strategic bottleneck focus, no structured sales process, and certainly no alignment between marketing and delivery.

"There's no vision," Kevin said aloud to the windscreen. "No leadership. No pride."

He could feel it in the bones of the place. People hadn't just lost direction — they'd stopped looking for one.

He turned off the highway, the city lights flickering in the distance. It was time to reframe the challenge. Not just a business problem. A *people* problem. A leadership vacuum.

As he pulled into his driveway, Kevin reached for the notebook on the passenger seat and jotted a few words:

Question Burst – Are we even solving the right problem?

And then, under it, he began to write:

- What if sales and margin are symptoms, not causes?
- What if the real issue is a lack of leadership at every level?
- What would this business look like if it were run with pride?
- What's stopping Dianne from leading? What's keeping Niko stuck?
- Who's responsible for culture on the floor?
- What if no one's ever been shown what good leadership looks like?
- If we don't define the ideal client, how will we ever serve them?
- How much value is trapped under all that clutter — physically and emotionally?
- What's the story the team believes about this business — and how do we change it?
- If we started fresh today, with this team and this equipment, what would we *not* do?

Kevin put the notebook down and exhaled.

"This isn't just a turnaround," he thought. "It's a reset. Starting with the people."

Top 10 list

The Ute gave its familiar creak as he shut the door, the kind that signalled a long day and an even longer to-do list.

He didn't head inside straight away. Instead, he grabbed the old leather-bound notebook from the passenger seat – the one with the bent corner and half a cracked elastic band still trying to hold it shut. He carried it to the small desk in his study, flicked on the lamp, and sat down. The house was quiet, the kind of silence that gives your thoughts space to breathe.

He took a breath. Then he started writing.

Monday – First Day Onsite – Integrity Fabrication

Initial Observations:

“This isn't just a broken business. It's a tired one. No pride. No momentum. No clear leadership. They're not lazy – they're lost.”

Niko and Dianne were carrying the weight of it all, but with no compass. Pete was doing what he could, in his own way, but had no real support or framework. The floor team? Forgotten. And it showed. The business wasn't just underperforming – it had given up on the idea that it *could* perform.

Kevin tapped his pen, then turned to a fresh page.

Where to Start – The Power of Small Wins

This wasn't the time for strategy decks or vision statements. This was time for traction. The kind you could see, touch, feel. Not talk about.

He wrote the heading in capital letters:

TEN QUICK WINS

To Rebuild Pride, Confidence, and Direction

1. **Kickstart a 5S Program – Workshop Team First**
Let them reclaim their space. Empower them. Photos before and after. Give the factory back to the team, one corner at a time.
2. **The ‘Broken but Loved’ Audit**
Work *with* Pete, not against him. Create a Red Tag Zone. Every week: keep, repair, or toss. Declutter without drama.
3. **Ideal Customer and Project Definition**
Use contribution analysis. Pull 5 past jobs – margin, ease, payment, effort. Define who we actually want to work with.
4. **Create the First Lead List**
Pull jobs from the past 2 years. Clean, filter, tag A/B/C. Begin outreach. Nothing fancy. Just consistent.
5. **Send Out the First Marketing Email**
Let the world know we’re awake again. Short update, honest tone. “We’re back. Can we help?” Call to action clear and human.
6. **Start a Daily 10-Minute Huddle**
Structure. Communication. Ownership. Keep it light, but regular. Wins, priorities, roadblocks. Rotate who leads by week 3.
7. **‘Wins of the Week’ Board in the Lunchroom**
Visual. Positive. Public. Every job completed, every block cleared, every compliment – pin it. Small wins matter most right now.
8. **The ‘Stop Doing’ List**
Everyone names one thing they believe is a waste of time. Pick three. Trial dropping them for 30 days. Watch what happens.
9. **Set a Floor Price and Quote Tool**
Pricing discipline. Build a calculator with Dianne – basic cost + margin. Give Niko the tool *and* the confidence to use it.

10. 1:1 Listening Sessions with Niko and Dianne

Not formal coaching — just conversation. Ask. Listen.

Reflect back. Let them hear themselves think. They need space, not speeches.

He looked at the list. It wasn't revolutionary. But it didn't need to be.

It needed to *work*.

He closed the notebook slowly, laid the pen across the top, and leaned back in the chair.

"Day One," he thought. *"We've got our foothold."*

Tomorrow, he'd start the first steps. Quietly, deliberately. No big declarations. Just momentum, one small win at a time.

The Mirror

Kevin leaned against the workshop's old kitchenette bench — all flaking laminate and forgotten instant coffee — and waited for the last of them to file in. Dianne arrived first, notepad in hand like a shield. Nick bounced in two minutes late, apologising without slowing down. Pete grunted from the doorway, arms crossed so tight it looked like he was self-welding.

Joe sat silently in the corner, arms loose, eyes sharp. Kevin had asked him to stay back, but he knew the old man wouldn't miss this for the world.

Kevin stood, hands in pockets, and looked at them one by one.

"Right. So, I've been here a week. Just watching. Listening. Walking around. And I need to tell you what I've seen. Because if we don't look in the mirror, we can't clean the muck off."

He paused. No one moved. Pete scratched his neck.

"What I walked into was a business that looks tired. Not just the building — the people. Tired of firefighting. Tired of stepping over the same crap on the floor. Tired of working hard and still feeling behind."

He let that sit. Nick looked down. Dianne glanced sideways, jaw clenched.

"This is a place built on survival. Joe — you should be proud of what you built. But survival culture is very different from success culture. One is reactive. The other is proactive. One waits for the taxman. The other plans for him."

Joe gave the barest of nods.

"I've seen hoarding — of tools, of responsibility, of knowledge. I've seen a team afraid to speak, in case they're blamed. I've seen no scoreboard, no line of sight to performance, no rhythm to execution."

Kevin's voice softened.

"I've seen a family business where no one feels like family anymore. You pass each other like ghosts, hoping not to trigger the next argument."

Silence.

Then he went on.

"You're not broken. You're stuck. There's a difference. But you need to decide — are we going to keep patching the cracks, or do we dig down and fix the foundations?"

Nick opened his mouth, then closed it.

Kevin stepped forward.

"I'm not here to play hero. I've done that before, and it doesn't end well. I'm here to build a business that doesn't need rescuing. One that runs without panic, with pride. But that only works if you're in. All the way in."

He looked at each of them again.

"I'll help you win small, win early. But I need one thing first — honesty. With yourselves. With each other. With me."

Then — the closer.

"If we can do that, this place becomes something worth fighting for again. And if not, well... I'll still send you an invoice."

A half-laugh escaped from Dianne. Joe smirked. Pete didn't smile, but his arms relaxed slightly.

Kevin waited. The silence stretched — then Nick stood up straight.

“Alright. Let's do it.”

Small Wins

Tuesday - 10:15 AM

The workshop smelled like steel and yesterday's sweat. Kevin stepped onto the floor with a small cardboard box under one arm, a marker and a roll of red tags tucked inside. He'd already given Niko a quiet heads-up that morning – just a casual mention they'd be “doing a bit of tidying.” Of course, Kevin knew full well this was less about cleaning and more about *reclaiming the floor*.

He approached Pete carefully. The man was bent over a folder, scribbling notes with the kind of focus that suggested he'd long since stopped waiting for others to tell him what mattered.

“Morning, Pete,” Kevin said with a calm smile. “Thought I'd grab you for a bit. You've probably got the best eye in the place when it comes to what's actually useful.”

Pete looked up, eyebrow raised. “Useful to who?”

Kevin grinned. “To people who want to keep their shins and their sanity.”

Pete gave a grunt. Not quite a laugh. Not quite a threat either. Progress.

Kevin set the box down on a benchtop, opened it, and pulled out a bright red tag.

“We're starting something simple,” he explained. “Not throwing anything out – yet. We're just tagging anything that looks broken, unused, or doesn't quite belong. It's part of a system called 5S. You might've heard of it.”

Pete frowned. “Sounds like a clean-out.”