

BATTLE OF THE BOARDROOM V BEDROOM — FREE SAMPLE

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A free sample — Introduction & Chapter One

*From the book by Eric Purvis with Joe Walsh. A companion to The Battle of Business.
Book Two of The Battle Series.*

INTRODUCTION — WHERE WE LEFT OFF

By the end of the first book I had, on paper, everything I'd been chasing for thirty years.

The business — the family entertainment centre — was humming. Twelve hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-four days a year, and for the first time in my life it ran without me standing in the middle of it holding the whole thing up with my bare hands. I'd built the systems Eric had pushed me to build. I'd hired well. I had a duty manager named Baz who'd been with me since the doors opened and could run the floor better than I could, a café manager named Kayla who knew her margins cold, and a roster that filled itself. I could go away for a fortnight and come back to a business that had got on just fine without me. I was, at long last, a shareholder and an investor in my own company more than I was a prisoner of it. And there's one more thing that changed in that quiet, and I've come to believe it matters more to this story than anything on a balance sheet, so I'm going to tell it even though it's personal.

With the business finally running itself, I had time — and I used some of it to deal with something I'd been carrying, literally, for years. My weight. Thirty years of stress and takeaway and never sitting still had put a lot of it on me; I'd got up around a hundred and thirty-five kilos. When Olivia and I first got together I'd been about a hundred and ten, and she was a good few years my junior, and — I'll be honest, because dishonesty here is no use to you — some part of me didn't fancy ending up the fat old bloke with the young wife. So, with the time and the money the business had finally freed up, I went and had a gastric sleeve, and I lost a lot of it. Got down into the low seventies at one point. Looked good. Felt, for the first time in decades, genuinely fantastic.

And here's the part I did not see coming, and did not understand until years later, and that a lot of you are going to need to hear. As the weight came off, something shifted in Olivia — in how she responded to me, how she was with me. At the time I couldn't name it. Looking back, I think I can. When she'd married me I was the overweight, older bloke, and I suspect some part of her felt *secure* in that — secure that a fat old

fella wasn't going to be much use to anyone else, wasn't going to be a flight risk, would stay put and could be, let's say, *steered*. And then I lost all the weight and turned into someone who was, whether I wanted to be or not, reasonably appealing to other people. I wasn't interested in anyone else, for the record — but I can't speak for what went on in her head, only for what I watched happen. And what I watched was insecurity arrive, and control tighten, and friction start where there'd been none.

I honestly think that's where the decline began — not in a boardroom, but in a bathroom mirror. A feeling, in her, of having lost control of a man she'd counted on not being able to leave. And I was completely blind to it while it was happening. It's only on the far side, laying it all out, that it makes a grim kind of sense.

I mentioned the feeling once to my surgeon, almost as a joke, and he didn't laugh. He told me it's a known thing — relationships that fail after one partner has weight-loss surgery, because the other partner's whole sense of security was quietly built on the way things were. I found that bizarre when he said it. Then I found it happening to me.

So here's some free advice, and it's the strangest advice in this whole book, and I mean every word. If you're carrying more than you'd like and you're thinking about a sleeve, or any big transformation — take an honest look at your relationship first. See how strong it really is, and how much of it is built on you staying exactly as you are. Because you're about to change, and the uncomfortable truth is that not everybody in your life actually wants you to. This whole book is about control — who has it, who's losing it, what people do when they feel it slipping. It took me a long time to understand that the first place I felt that fight for control wasn't over the business at all. It was over me.

That's the dream they sell you in every business book, mine included, and I'd actually got there. And I want to tell you honestly what that felt like, because it matters for everything that comes next: it felt *quiet*. After thirty years of noise — the cash-flow panics, the 2am staff calls, the sick feeling every time the EFTPOS terminal went down on a Saturday — the quiet was strange. I didn't quite know what to do with myself. And a man who doesn't know what to do with himself is a man about to make a decision.

So I did what you do when you finally lift your head up after years of staring at your own feet. I rang Eric and asked him the big question. *Where to from here?*

We kicked it around over a few coffees at the place near his office — Eric always makes you come to him, says a man who won't drive twenty minutes for advice won't act on it either. There were a few doors open to me, and none of them was wrong.

I could **sit on it** — take the income, keep it ticking, leave something for the boys one day. A legacy. James, Oliver and George were still young, but you start thinking about that sort of thing once the business stops trying to kill you.

I could **sell it** — take the chips off the table, bank the win, and go find out who I was when I wasn't the bloke who owned the go-kart place.

Or I could **grow it** — take one good venue and turn it into a bigger beast. Maybe two. Maybe a brand.

“They’re all legitimate,” Eric said. “The mistake isn’t picking the wrong one. The mistake is not picking. A business that’s just drifting because the owner can’t decide — that’s the one that gets into trouble. Indecision looks safe. It isn’t.”

To keep myself honest while I chewed on it, I’d done something I was quietly proud of. I’d put a small **advisory board** in place. Three good heads. Frank, a retired accountant who’d forgotten more about numbers than I’ll ever know and had exactly zero interest in flattering me. Marg, who’d built a little hospitality group and sold it for a very nice number and knew where all the bodies were buried in that game. And Dev, a marketing bloke, half my age, who understood the internet in a way I frankly never will. They met with me every month or so, looked at the real numbers — not the numbers I wished were true, the real ones — and told me when I was about to do something stupid. It was, hands down, one of the best things I’d ever done for the business. It stopped me being the smartest and dumbest person in my own company at the same time, which is the natural condition of every owner-operator I’ve ever met.

Everything was, in a word, good.

And then, quietly, the way the important things always move, the ground shifted under me. And I swear to you I didn’t feel it happen.

Our bookkeeper retired. Trish, who’d done our books for years, hit sixty-three and decided she’d rather be minding her grandkids than reconciling my accounts, and fair enough. So there was a gap. And Olivia — my wife — said she’d step in and take it over while we found someone to replace her.

“I did the books for Dad’s business for years,” she said. “It’s not exactly rocket science, Joe. Why pay someone eighty grand for something I can do at the kitchen table?”

And she had a point. She’s sharp, Olivia. Genuinely. Good head for numbers, quick as anything, and she’s not one to do a job by halves. So Olivia took the books. Just temporarily. Just till we found someone.

We never found someone. We never really looked.

And then, slowly but surely, over a period of months, Olivia took a bit more. And a bit more. And a bit more.

The bookkeeping led to the banking. The banking led to “well, while I’m in the accounts anyway” looking at the wage bill, and questioning the rosters, and then doing the rosters. The rosters led to the staff, and the staff led to HR, and somewhere in there she decided the marketing we were paying Dev’s agency mate for was a waste of money and she could do better herself, and — you know what — some of it she could.

Here’s the part I’m not proud of, and I’m going to say it plainly because if I dress it up it’s no use to you. **I let it happen.** Every step of it. Not because I thought it was a good idea. Because each individual step was too small to be worth a fight, and the fights

were happening at home, at the kitchen table, in front of the boys, and I am at heart a bloke who wants a quiet house. So each time there was a choice between “have the argument” and “let it go,” I let it go.

And one day I looked up and three things had happened that I’d never actually decided. My wife was running my business.

The advisory board — Frank, Marg and Dev — had drifted away. Not in a blow-up. Worse than that. They’d stopped being listened to. Olivia would sit in the meetings, and whatever the board suggested, there’d be a reason it wouldn’t work, and the reason was usually delivered in a tone that made it clear the discussion was over. Good people don’t stay where they’re not heard. Frank was the first to quietly not renew. Then Marg. Dev hung on the longest, then sent me a nice email saying he thought the board had “run its course” and he was always there for a coffee. My circuit breaker was gone, and I’d let that go too.

And I’d told myself the story every bloke in my position tells himself. I can hear it now, the exact words in my own head: *“Look — she’s capable, it’s keeping her happy, it’s keeping the peace at home, and the business is a simple enough beast that one or two good people can run it. Let it go.”*

That sentence — *let it go* — is where this whole book starts. Not because letting things go is always wrong. Half of being married is knowing what to let go. But there’s a difference between letting go of whose turn it is to unstack the dishwasher and letting go of the governance of the single biggest asset you own, the thing that feeds your family and employs thirty people, one peaceful evening at a time, without ever once saying out loud, “I am hereby handing control of this business to my spouse, and here’s how we’ll make decisions now.”

I never said that. I just stopped arguing. And stopping arguing, it turns out, is a decision. It’s just a decision you make by not making it — which means you never get to set the terms.

Eric has a line about this that I’ve since had tattooed on the inside of my skull, figuratively speaking. He says: **“The most expensive decisions in a business are the quiet ones you make to avoid an argument at home. Nobody minutes them. Nobody signs them. You just slowly give away control, one peaceful night at a time — and by the time you notice, the cost of taking it back has gone through the roof.”**

He was right. It had. And I was about to find out exactly how high.

BATTLE TIP Right now, before you read another page, ask yourself one question and answer it honestly: *What have I “let go” in my business in the last two years — not because it was the right call, but because fighting about it was too hard at home?* Write the list. Don’t fix anything yet. Just see it. You cannot take back ground you won’t admit you gave away.

YOUR MOVE 1. Write down, in one sentence each, the three options in front of your business right now (grow / sell / hold — or your own version). Don't choose yet. Just name them. 2. Name your circuit breaker. Who, outside your marriage, has the standing to tell you you're wrong about your own business — and when did you last actually listen to them?

CHAPTER 1 — OLIVIA JOINS THE MANAGEMENT TEAM

Once Olivia had the books, the rest came fast — and I mean fast in the way a landslide is fast. Nothing moves for a long time, and then everything moves at once.

Let me give you the shape of the year, because the timeline matters. It was roughly twelve months from Trish retiring to the morning I'm about to tell you about, and in that twelve months Olivia went from "helping with the books while we find someone" to being, in every practical sense, the general manager of the business. Not by appointment. There was never a day I said "you're the GM now." By absorption. By the simple physics of a capable, driven person moving into a vacuum and a tired, conflict-averse husband stepping back to let her.

First the bookkeeping. Then, "Joe, why are we paying Dev's mob two grand a month when half of it's just boosting posts? I can do that." And she could — she set up the socials, she ran the school-holiday campaigns, and the bookings held up, so what was I going to say? Then the rosters — "Baz is over-rostering weekends, look at these numbers" — and she was half right, Baz did like a fat roster because Baz hated being short, and suddenly Olivia was doing the rosters and Baz was reporting to Olivia about the rosters, which is a different thing from Baz reporting to me. Then the café — "Kayla's ordering is all over the place" — and the hiring, and the firing, and the supplier contracts.

And I want to be fair to her, because this book could easily turn into a bloke blaming his wife for his own failure to lead, and that's not the truth and it wouldn't help you. Olivia was not hopeless. She was, in a lot of ways, good at it. She worked like a demon. She cared. She'd walk the floor on a Saturday and pick up rubbish the staff walked past. She noticed things. The business didn't fall over — for a good while it ran along about as well as it ever had.

So what was the problem? For a long time I genuinely couldn't have told you. Everything looked fine. The numbers were okay. Olivia seemed happy — happier, even; she had somewhere to put all that drive. And yet something had gone wrong that I couldn't name, and it took me months and one very blunt coffee with Eric to be able to name it.

Here's what had gone wrong. **I had lost the ability to have a straight conversation about my own business.**

Because every business conversation was now also a marriage conversation. Watch how this works, because it's the whole engine of the thing. I'd notice the marketing spend had crept up and I'd say, at dinner, "Hey, the marketing's up a fair bit this

quarter, what's driving that?" And in a business with a normal manager, that's a normal question, and you get a normal answer: "Yeah, we front-loaded the winter campaign, it'll normalise." But Olivia wasn't a normal manager. Olivia was my wife. So the question didn't land as "what's driving the marketing spend." It landed as "you don't think I'm doing a good job." And the answer wasn't a number. The answer was a *tone*. And the tone came home with us, and sat at the end of the bed, and was still there in the morning.

I stopped asking the questions.

Let me give you a Tuesday, because it was always a Tuesday, and because if you're living this you'll know the exact one I mean.

Dinner. The five of us — me, Olivia, and the three boys. Fish fingers, because it was a Tuesday. And under the table, on my knee where I thought no one could see, my phone, open on the banking app, because I'd noticed the marketing spend had jumped again and I wanted to look without *asking*, because asking had become the problem. That's the first thing that went, and it's the thing I'd warn you to watch for above all others: I had started *sneaking looks at my own business*. A grown man, hiding his own numbers under the dinner table like a teenager checking football scores, because the alternative — saying out loud, "hey, the marketing's up, what's that about?" — cost more than I could pay that night.

I must have sighed, or my face did something, because Olivia said, without looking up, "What."

Not a question. A warning shot.

"Nothing," I said. "Just tired."

"You're on your phone."

"Sorry." And I put it away. And that was the whole exchange, and it doesn't look like anything written down, but I want you to feel what it actually was: it was me, the owner of the business, apologising for looking at the business, at my own kitchen table, to keep the peace. If you've done that — if you've ever put your phone away and swallowed the question and said "just tired" — then this book is about you as much as it's about me, and you are very much not the only one. There are thousands of us. We just don't talk about it, because what would we even say? *My marriage and my business have become the same thing and I can't tell where one ends?* You don't say that over a beer.

And then James — my eldest, ten or eleven at the time, old enough to read a room and young enough to say what he read — looked up from his fish fingers and said, in that flat kid way that goes through you like a skewer:

"Are you and Mum fighting about the shop again?"

Again. That word. Not "are you fighting" — "again," and "about the shop," because to my boys the shop had become a third parent, a moody one, the one that made Mum and

Dad go quiet at dinner and short with each other in the car. My kids had a *category* for it. They'd noticed the pattern before I'd admitted it to myself. Kids are the smoke alarm you can't switch off.

"No, mate," I said. "Everything's good. Eat your dinner."

Which was a lie, and he knew it was a lie, and I knew he knew, and Olivia knew, and nobody said anything, and we all ate our fish fingers in a quiet that had a texture to it. That quiet — the one with a texture — is the sound a family business makes when it's started to eat the family. If your dinners have gone quiet in a way that has a texture, you already know what I'm telling you. You just maybe didn't have words for it yet. Now you do, and here's the important part: it is not because you married the wrong person or built the wrong business or are a weak man or a difficult woman. It's because two enormous things — the thing you love and the thing you built — have fused, and nobody ever taught you how to keep them apart. Nobody teaches this. I'm trying to, now, too late for me and hopefully in time for you.

Think about what that means, because it's genuinely dangerous. The owner of the business — the bloke whose name is on the personal guarantees, whose house is on the line — had stopped being able to *ask questions about his own business* because the cost of asking was measured in nights of silence at home. I still owned the risk. I'd given away the oversight. That is the single worst position you can be in, and I'd walked into it one avoided question at a time.

My body would be at work but my head was managing the marriage. My body would be at home but my head was managing the business — running the numbers I was no longer allowed to ask about out loud. The two rooms — the boardroom and the bedroom — had become one room, and I couldn't find the door out of it. That's not a metaphor I reached for later to sell books. That's the actual, physical feeling I had, standing in my own venue on a Saturday, watching my wife run the thing I built, unable to say what I could see, and going home to a marriage that was quietly being run like a subsidiary of a dispute I wasn't allowed to have.

I'm an easy-going sort of bloke, as you know. So — you guessed it — I let it go. Again. Right up until I couldn't, because a clock started ticking that doesn't care how easy-going you are.

The lease.

We had somewhere between eighteen months and two years left on the lease of the building. And a lease clock is the one clock in business you cannot sweet-talk, can't charm, can't let go. It just counts down. When it ran out I'd have to make a call I'd been dodging for a year: position the place for a clean **exit** — tidy it up, sell it as a going concern to someone with fresh energy — or commit and **grow** — a bigger site, a bigger fit-out, a proper step up, a bigger beast.

And here's the thing I knew in my gut and could not say out loud, the sentence that had been sitting in my chest like a stone for months: **Olivia could run the operation we**

had. She could not run the one I wanted to build. And she would never, ever admit that.

Because — and this is important, this is the whole tragedy of it — running a smallish, stable, single-site operation and building and running a scaled-up, multi-front, capital-hungry beast are two completely different jobs. The first rewards diligence, control, attention to detail, and Olivia had all of those in spades. The second requires delegation, comfort with systems you didn't build, trusting managers you can't personally watch, and a willingness to be one voice among several — and those were exactly the things Olivia had spent the last year *removing* from the business. She'd run off the advisory board. She'd pulled every function into her own hands. She had made herself the indispensable centre of a small machine, which is precisely the profile of the person least able to run a big one.

I couldn't say any of that. Because there was no version of "I don't think you can run the bigger business" that wasn't also, at the kitchen table, "I don't think much of you." The business truth and the marriage landmine were welded together, and I'd done the welding myself, with a year of avoided questions.

So one Tuesday morning, sitting in the car in the venue car park before I'd gone in, watching the cleaners' cars and not wanting to walk through my own front door, I finally rang Eric.

"Mate," I said. "I've got a situation."

"You've had a situation for a while," Eric said. "You've just started admitting it. Tell me."

So I told him. Olivia's in the business every day. She's taken control of the lot — books, marketing, HR, café, suppliers. I let it happen. It's not *not* working, but I can feel it going wrong, and there's a lease clock, and inside two years I've got to sell or grow, and I don't think she can run the grown version, and I can't say so, and the whole thing's tangled up with the marriage and I can't get a clean grip on any of it.

Eric was quiet for a second. Then he said the thing that reorganised my entire understanding of my own life, and he said it flat, no cushion:

"Joe, having a family member working in your business in a management role — a spouse especially — is, as a general rule, a recipe for one of two things. Marital disaster, or business failure. Very often both, one after the other. And you should, as a rule, never do it."

"Bit late for that," I said.

"It's always bit late for that," he said. "Nobody rings me *before*. Alright. It's done. So the job now isn't to undo it — you probably can't, not cleanly. The job is to *mitigate the damage being done to the business without doing a whole lot more damage to the marriage*. And I want you to hear how hard that is, because those two goals pull in

opposite directions. Every move that's good for the business — clarity, accountability, oversight, other people in the room — reads at home as distrust. And every move that's good for the peace at home — letting it go, keeping her happy, avoiding the question — is another notch of damage to the business. You are standing between two ropes pulling opposite ways, and you've been standing there so long you've stopped noticing it's tearing you in half."

I asked him what I should do.

"First question," he said. "What happened to your advisory board?"

"Gone," I said. "Frank, Marg, Dev. They drifted off. Weren't being listened to."

Long pause. "Right," Eric said. "That's the actual problem, Joe. Not Olivia. The board. That board was your **circuit breaker**. When you and Olivia disagreed about the business, that disagreement used to have somewhere to *go* that wasn't the marriage. The board could take a position on the merits — 'the marketing spend's too high for the return, wind it back' — and now it's not you-versus-her, it's both of you executing a call a neutral third party made. The heat goes out of it. You take the circuit breaker out, and every single business disagreement runs straight through the marriage with nothing in between. No wonder the house is sparking. You pulled out the one thing that was earthing it."

"So I put the board back?"

"We'll get to that," he said, "and I'll warn you now it's the hardest move in the book, because rebuilding a board Olivia ran off will land at home as 'I don't trust you' with a bow on it. But before any of that —" and here he changed gear, and I could hear him leaning forward — "I've met Olivia, Joe. Couple of times. She's a genuinely capable woman and she's got a good head on her. She has also got, and you know this better than I do, an ego roughly the size of South America, and she is proud. Proud in the way that can't be seen to be wrong, can't be seen to be managed, can't be seen to be given a smaller role than the one she's taken. So whatever you do here, you're going to have to do it with real delicacy. Get it wrong — go in like a bull, try to take it all back at once, make her feel demoted in her own kitchen — and you won't just lose the argument. You'll end up on the wrong end of a divorce settlement, and I mean that literally, not as a figure of speech. Be very, very careful how you do this."

"You paint a lovely picture," I said.

He laughed. "That's what you pay me for. Buy me a coffee next week. Bring the real numbers. We'll build you a plan."

We sat down the following Thursday. He bought, which — if you know Eric — tells you exactly how serious he thought it was.

"Before we talk tactics," he said, "tell me what you actually *want*. Not what keeps the peace. Not what Olivia wants. What *you* want for this business. Because you cannot

build a strategy around avoiding an argument, and that's all you've had for two years — an avoidance strategy. Avoidance isn't a plan. It's just slow surrender with good manners."

And that question — *what do you actually want* — was harder to answer than it should have been, because I'd spent so long managing everyone else's feelings about the business that I'd genuinely lost track of my own view of it. We sat there a while. I drew a bad diagram on a napkin. And what came clear, once I stripped the sentiment out, surprised me a little: I didn't want to sell, and I didn't want to coast. I wanted to *grow it*. The current building was already too small on peak days — we were turning families away at 11am on a Saturday, which is money walking out the door. The lease was nearly up. And there was a bigger, better venue in me. I could see it. A proper regional destination, not just the local go-kart place.

"Good," Eric said, and he wrote GROW at the top of the napkin and underlined it. "Now. Two things follow from that, and the order matters. Thing one is the vision — the bigger site, the relocation, the beast. Thing two is the *machinery* — how you and Olivia are going to make decisions when the bigger thing gets hard, which it will. And here's the trap you're going to walk straight into if I let you: you're going to go home tonight, all fired up, and sell Olivia the vision, and she's going to love it, and you're going to feel like you've fixed everything. And you'll have fixed nothing, because you'll have got agreement on the *destination* and skipped the agreement on *how you drive*. And it's the driving that crashes marriages, not the destination. Nobody divorces over where they're going. They divorce over ten thousand small fights about how to get there."

"So what do I do?"

"Tonight, you put the vision to her, because she has to be on the same page or none of this works — a couple pulling opposite ways on a project this big will tear the business and the marriage apart, guaranteed. So: same page first. Get her genuinely on board, not just nodding to keep you quiet. *But* —" and he pointed his flat white at me — "that's step one of about ten, and steps two through ten are all about the machinery. The board. The roles. The scorecards. The 'what if it all goes wrong' documents nobody wants to sign. Do not, whatever you do, mistake tonight's good feeling for the job being done. Tonight is the *easy* part."

So I went home. I sat Olivia down at the kitchen table after the boys were in bed. I laid out the whole thing — the lease clock, the Saturdays we were turning families away, the bigger site, the vision. A proper destination venue. Our name on something real.

And she loved it. Genuinely. Her eyes lit up in a way I hadn't seen in a long time. "Yes," she said. "God, yes, Joe, this is exactly what I've been thinking. Let's do it. Let's find the site."

And I walked out of that kitchen feeling ten feet tall. My wife was on board. The vision was set. We were aligned. I'd fixed it.

I had, of course, done exactly the thing Eric told me not to do. I'd got the easy bit — agreeing on the dream — and skipped the hard bit — agreeing, in advance and in writing and with a neutral party in the room, on *who decides what* when the dream got difficult. I'd lit the fuse on the biggest, most stressful, most expensive project of our lives without rebuilding a single one of the bulkheads that stop a project like that from sinking the whole ship.

We started looking for premises the very next weekend. And for about a month, it was the happiest we'd been in years.

That month was the eye of the storm. I just didn't know it yet.

BATTLE TIP “We agree on the goal” is not the same as “we agree on how we'll decide.” Couples in business almost always share the vision — that's the easy, romantic part. What wrecks them is the thousand smaller decisions on the way to it. If you have not agreed, *in advance and out loud*, who owns which decisions and how you'll break a deadlock, then every one of those thousand decisions is a live marital negotiation. Sort out the decision-making machinery before you start the big build, not during it. During it, you'll be too tired and too scared to negotiate fairly.

YOUR MOVE 1. Answer Eric's question on paper: *What do I actually want for this business* — not what keeps the peace, not what my partner wants. One paragraph. Be honest enough that it's a little uncomfortable to read back. 2. Before you sell anyone a vision, write the sentence you're most afraid to say out loud about your business or your partner's role in it. You don't have to say it yet. But name it — because that unsaid sentence is steering everything, and things you can't name, you can't manage.

That's the free sample. Battle of the Boardroom v Bedroom runs on through the circuit breaker, the real email that ended it, the reckoning, and a full playbook of tools at the back.