

THE BATTLE WITHIN — FREE SAMPLE

THE BATTLE WITHIN

FINDING YOURSELF, LOVE AND JOY AFTER THE SYSTEM TOOK EVERYTHING

Eric Purvis, with Joe Walsh

A companion to The Battle of Business & Battle of the Boardroom v Bedroom & The Battle for the Kids

Book Four of The Battle Series

“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.” — Viktor E. Frankl

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A note on the hard stuff. This book talks openly about emptiness, numbness, the mental damage the system does, and about wanting to be gone. If any of it lands too close, please stop and reach out. **Lifeline 13 11 14 • MensLine 1300 78 99 78 • Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636 • Emergency 000.** Nothing in these pages is therapy or medical advice. It's one bloke's map out of a hole, and a signpost to the people whose actual job is to help you climb. Get them. I did, in the end, and it's the only reason there's a book.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

You've met Joe Walsh three times now. In *The Battle of Business* he nearly worked himself into the ground building a company that could run without him. In *Battle of the Boardroom v Bedroom* he watched that company and his marriage become the same room, and lose. In *The Battle for the Kids* he went to war with a system that branded him without asking him a single question, and

it cost him nearly everything — one son estranged, a business liquidated, and, for one bad stretch, his own will to keep going.

This book is about what happened next. Not the fight. The *after*. The part nobody warns you about, where the enemy finally leaves the field and you discover the hardest battle was waiting underneath the whole time — the one with yourself.

It's the quietest book in the series, and the most personal. If you've come out the far side of something that took your name, your money, your kids, your health, or all four, and you're standing in the wreckage wondering whether you'll ever feel like a person again — whether you could ever let someone in again, whether you'll ever just *smile* again and mean it — this one's for you. You are not broken beyond repair. You are not alone. And there is a way back. Not a cure. A way.

PART ONE — THE QUIET AFTER THE WAR

CHAPTER 1 — THE ANTICLIMAX

I thought the day it ended would feel like something.

I'd pictured it for years, the way you picture water when you're thirsty. The final order. The last email from the last lawyer. The day the phone stopped being a threat. I thought there'd be a moment — a breath let out, a weight lifted, some music swelling somewhere in the vicinity of my chest — where I'd stand up straight for the first time in half a decade and feel the sun on my face and think: *I made it. It's over.*

Here's what actually happened. I read the email in the car park of a Bunning's, sitting in the ute with a snag getting cold on the dash, and I read it twice to be sure, and then I put the phone face-down on the passenger seat and I sat there, and I waited to feel it.

And nothing came.

Not relief. Not joy. Not even the grim satisfaction I'd rehearsed. Just a flat, ringing quiet, like the silence after a smoke alarm finally stops — where the noise had been going so long that its absence is its own kind of loud. I remember thinking, in a distant way, *this is supposed to be the good part*. And

then I finished the snag because it was there, and I drove home, because it was time to get the boys, because that's what the days were made of now. And that was it. That was the end of the war. A cold sausage and a drive home.

Nobody tells you about the anticlimax. They tell you to hang on until it's over, and they're right to — you should, it does end, hanging on is the whole game. But they don't tell you that "over" doesn't arrive like a finish line with a ribbon. It arrives like a dropped phone call. One second there's a voice, a fight, a *thing* organising every cell in your body, and the next there's just... dial tone. And you're standing there holding the phone going *hello? hello?* to a war that has already hung up on you.

I'd spent five years as a man defined entirely by what I was against. I was the bloke fighting the finding. The bloke fighting for the kids. The bloke fighting the business under, the bloke fighting to stay alive some nights. Take all of that away — actually *win* it, or survive it, which in that world is the same thing — and I looked down and realised I had no idea who was standing in my shoes. The fight had become the scaffolding I was hanging off. Kick the scaffolding away and I didn't stand tall and free. I just fell into the space where it had been.

I rang Eric a few days later. Not because anything was wrong, exactly. Because nothing was, and that was somehow worse.

"It's done," I told him. "Signed. Finished. The lot."

"Mate," he said, "that's massive. How do you feel?"

And I sat with the phone against my ear in my little rebuilt kitchen and I told him the truth, which I hadn't said out loud yet, not even to myself.

"I don't," I said. "That's the thing, Eric. I don't feel anything at all."

There was a pause, and then he said the thing that started this whole book, the thing I want you to have on page one so you don't waste the months I wasted thinking I was defective.

"Yeah," he said. "That tracks. You've been running on adrenaline and fear for five years. That's not a mood, that's a fuel. And you just ran out of war to burn it on. The empty you're feeling isn't you being ungrateful, or broken, or dead inside. It's a bloke whose body has been on red alert since 2020 finally getting the message that the threat's gone — and not having the first clue what to do with a nervous system that no longer needs to be terrified. Give it time. But don't sit in it alone. That's how blokes like us get in trouble in the quiet."

THE NUMBERS Psychiatrist Judith Herman, whose *Trauma and Recovery* is one of the foundational texts on this, describes recovery as unfolding in stages — and the *first* isn't "getting over it." It's **safety and stabilisation**: your body learning, slowly, that the danger has actually passed. That crash you feel when a long threat finally ends has a physiology behind it. For years your system floods you with stress chemistry to keep you fighting; when the fight stops, it doesn't just switch to contentment — it often drops into a flat, exhausted numbness while it recalibrates. Bessel van der Kolk, in *The Body Keeps the Score*, puts it bluntly: trauma isn't the event, it's what the event leaves behind in the body long after it's "over." The anticlimax isn't a character flaw. It's a nervous system, standing down.

That helped more than I can tell you — not because it fixed anything, but because it renamed it. I wasn't an ungrateful prick who'd got what he wanted and felt nothing. I was a man whose alarm had been screaming so long that silence felt like malfunction. There's a enormous difference between *I am broken* and *I am a normal person having a normal response to an abnormal five years*. The first one you sit alone with. The second one you can actually work with.

So if you're reading this in your own version of that Bunning's car park — the day you'd waited years for arriving with all the emotional punch of a cold sausage — hear me: that's not the end of your feeling. It's the beginning of it. The numbness is real, and it's temporary, and it is not a verdict on the rest of your life. It's the strangest, loneliest, most important stretch of the whole journey, because it's the first stretch that's actually *yours* — not the system's, not the ex's, not the lawyers'. Yours.

The war is over. Now comes the harder bit. Now you have to work out who you are without it — and whether the hollow man in the car park can be built back into someone who feels the sun again.

Stick with me. He can.

YOUR MOVE 1. If the "end" landed flat, write down one sentence: *I am having a normal reaction to an abnormal thing*. Put it where you'll see it. You'll need it more than once. 2. Make one call this week to a person, not a process — a mate, a GP, a helpline — and say the quiet part: "It's over, and I don't feel the way I thought I would." The quiet after the war is where isolated blokes get into strife. Don't sit in it alone. **Lifeline 13 11 14 • MensLine 1300 78 99 78.**

CHAPTER 2 — THE MAN IN THE MIRROR

The form asked me what I was, and I couldn't answer it.

It was a new GP — my old one had retired, and this was the intake sheet you fill in on a clipboard while a toddler somewhere behind you loses his mind over a sticker. Name. Date of birth. Then a little box: *Marital status*. And I sat there with the biro hovering, and I genuinely didn't know what to put.

Married? No. Single? That word felt like a lie told by a younger man, one who'd never had a ring. Divorced was true but it landed like a diagnosis, a permanent stamp on the record. There isn't a box for *survived it*. There isn't a box for *there used to be four of us in a house I built and now there's three of us in a smaller one and one of them won't take my calls*. So I ticked "divorced," which is the sort of tiny surrender you make forty times a day and never mention to anyone, and I moved on to the next box.

Occupation.

And that one stopped me cold too, because the honest answer — the one my body gave before my brain could tidy it — wasn't a job. It was: *respondent*. *Defendant*. *The accused*. *The payer*. Five years of paperwork had quietly filled that box in for me, and none of the words were ones you can hand to a receptionist.

Here's what nobody warns you about a long war with the system. It doesn't just take your money and your time and, if you're unlucky, your kids. It takes the language you use for yourself. For half a decade every important document that arrived with my name on it defined me by an accusation. I was the *respondent* — the one who responds, who reacts, who exists only in relation to what someone else has alleged. I was the *accused*, which quietly becomes, in a man's own head, *the guilty*, no matter what the finding says or doesn't say. I was, to the CSA, a *payer* — not a father, a payer, a wallet with a deadline. Read enough of that, for enough years, and it stops being what the system calls you and starts being what you call yourself.

I caught my own reflection one morning in the bathroom mirror — properly caught it, the way you sometimes see a stranger in a shop window and get a half-second jolt before you realise it's you — and I didn't recognise the bloke looking back. Not because he'd aged, though he had, hard. Because I looked at him and the first word that arrived, unbidden, was *him*. Third person. I'd stopped being *me* to myself. I'd become a case file with a face.

And the shame. God, the shame. That's the part I most need to get right for you, because it's the part that nearly finished me, and it's the part that makes the least sense from the outside.

I carried shame that was never mine to carry.

Nothing was proven. I'd fought a finding built on an accusation, and I'd come out the far side with my name more or less intact. And still — *still* — I moved through the world like a man with something to hide. I'd tense when someone asked what happened with the marriage. I'd change the subject when the kids came up at a barbecue. I'd rehearse explanations for a jury that didn't exist. Because that's what the machine does to you: it doesn't need to convict you to shame you. The process *is* the punishment. Being made to answer, over and over, for who you are — it plants a thing in you that says *you must have done something, or why would all this be happening to you?* And that thing doesn't read the final orders. It doesn't care that you won. It just sits there, in the chest, humming.

I told Eric about the mirror. The him-not-me thing. I expected him to tell me I was being dramatic.

"That makes complete sense," he said instead, which is somehow always more alarming than sympathy. "Mate, you've spent five years being told who you are by people who never met you and had a reason to think the worst. Of course you flinched when you saw yourself — you've been looking at yourself through *their* file this whole time. The question you've got to start asking isn't *what does the record say I am*. It's *what actually happened to me, versus who I actually am* — because those are two completely different things, and the system has spent five years gluing them together on purpose."

You may recall, if you read *The Battle for the Kids*, that at the very end I told my sons they are *victims of circumstance, not victims* — that what happened to them was never a verdict on who they are. That is exactly what I now had to start telling myself, over and over, until some of it stuck.

I sat with that one for a long time.

What happened to me versus who I am. Because those had fused, somewhere in the middle of it all. What happened to me was an accusation, a war, a machine, a loss. That was real, and it was terrible, and it was *done to me*. But it wasn't *me*. A man is not the worst thing ever alleged about him. A man is not the box on the form. What was done to me was a chapter. It was never the whole book, and it was never the author.

THE NUMBERS Psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, in *Shattered Assumptions* (1992), described how trauma doesn't just hurt — it breaks the basic beliefs we quietly run our lives on: that the world is broadly safe, that things are broadly fair, and that we ourselves are decent and worthy. When those shatter, a lot of people don't just grieve what happened; they lose their grip on *who they are*. That "I don't recognise myself" feeling has a name in the literature — identity disruption — and it's a documented response to prolonged, overwhelming stress, not a character weakness. The way back that the research keeps pointing to isn't gritting your teeth harder. It's the opposite. Kristin Neff, who has spent two decades studying **self-compassion**, breaks it into three plain parts: **self-kindness** instead of harsh self-judgement (talking to yourself the way you'd talk to a mate in the same hole); **common humanity** (this happened to a human being, and suffering and failure are part of every human life, not proof you're uniquely broken); and **mindfulness** (facing the pain squarely without drowning in it or shoving it down). Neff's studies link higher self-compassion to lower shame, anxiety and depression. Two honest caveats: self-compassion is not the same as letting yourself off the hook or going soft — the research is clear it sits *alongside* accountability, not instead of it. And it's a skill, not a switch. You practise it badly for a while before you do it well. But it is learnable, and for men marinated in self-blame, it may be the single most useful thing on this list.

That word — *practise* — mattered to me, because I'd assumed self-esteem was something you either had or you'd had taken off you for good. Turns out it's more like a muscle you can rebuild, slowly, badly at first, in a body that's forgotten how.

So I started stupidly small. When the shame-voice piped up — *you must have done something* — I made myself answer it the way I'd answer George if he said it about himself. Out loud, sometimes, in the car, feeling like an idiot: *No, mate. Something was done to you. That's different.* I made myself notice when I referred to myself as *him*, the case file, and drag it back to *me*. I stopped ticking the box that defined me by the worst season of my life and started, quietly, choosing my own words for what I was. Father. Builder of a smaller, better business. Bloke who got two kids through the worst of it. Survivor of a thing that doesn't get a box on the form.

None of it was true yet, quite. That's the strange part. You have to say the new words for a while before they fit — you rebuild the man from the outside in, laying down the language first and letting the self grow back into it like a plaster cast in reverse. But I'll tell you what I noticed after a few weeks of it: the stranger in the mirror stopped being a stranger. Not friendly, yet. But familiar. A bloke I was starting to be on speaking terms with again.

Here's what I want you to take from this chapter, if you take nothing else.

The system can define you for as long as it's got you in its machinery. But the machine stops. And when it does, you get the pen back. Nobody hands it to you — you have to notice it's back in your hand, and it takes a while, because you've forgotten the weight of it. But it's yours. What was done to you is not who you are. The accusation is not the man. And the man in the mirror, the one you've been flinching from — he's not a case file with a face. He's just you, waiting, a bit battered, for someone to look at him kindly.

Start with you. Be the one who does.

YOUR MOVE 1. Catch one place the system's language has become *your* language — "the respondent," "the payer," the worst thing ever alleged about you — and write, next to it, the true word: *father. survivor. me*. You're not lying. You're taking the pen back. 2. When the shame-voice starts, answer it the way you'd answer your own kid saying it about themselves: *Something was done to you. That's not the same as who you are*. Say it out loud if you have to. Feeling like an idiot is part of the treatment. 3. Read one page of Kristin Neff, or do one of her free self-compassion exercises online, before you decide it's soft. It isn't. It's the hardest and most useful thing a self-blaming bloke can learn. If the shame is loud and constant, that's a GP-and-a-Mental-Health-Care-Plan conversation, not a solo one. **Lifeline 13 11 14 • MensLine 1300 78 99 78.**

This is a free sample — the opening of The Battle Within (Book Four of The Battle Series). The full book carries on through the crutches, the fear, the question of love again, and the way back to joy and purpose — plus a practical Toolkit.