

# LOCKER ROOM TO BOARDROOM

*How Former Athletes Build Businesses  
That Run Without Them*

## CHAPTER ONE

MATT FOSS

# If You Recognize Yourself

This is a story about a man who never existed. You will still recognize him.

His name is Edward Williams. His company is invented. His family is invented. Everything he is about to walk through is real. I lived most of it. I have coached leaders through the rest of it. And if you are the person I wrote this for, you already know it before you turn the page.

You played a sport at a level most people only watched. You were tougher than the guy next to you because you had to be. You earned everything you have through output, through refusing to be outworked. And somewhere between the field and the office, you lost the thing that made you dangerous.

You have rehearsed a conversation with someone on your team for years, and you still have not had it.

You are the reason your company cannot grow, and some part of you already knows it.

If any of that lands, read this book. Then keep it where you can reach it. This is not the kind of book you finish on a flight and forget. It is the kind you build from, and then come back to, because what Edward builds takes real time to build and longer to remember, and you are going to want the reminder more than once. I wrote it so a man could actually build what Edward builds, in his own company, with his own people, not just nod along and feel understood for an afternoon.

You are not reading Edward's story.

You are reading yours.

*Matt*



## **PART ONE: THE GAP**

# **Chapter 1: The Monday That Broke Him**

Edward Williams is forty-five years old, and All Star Mechanical is having the best year of its life. Eighteen million dollars in revenue. Seventy-five people on the payroll. A backlog that would make half the contractors in Indianapolis jealous.

This is the morning he starts to understand that he is the reason it will never be worth more.

The alarm goes off at 5:30. There was a version of him that beat it every morning, up and moving before it rang, the first hour of the day his before anyone else wanted a piece of it. Now he reaches for the phone before his feet touch the floor. Nineteen emails since midnight, three of them fires only he can put out.

One is from the general contractor on the Richmond Place job, asking why All Star missed a submittal deadline nobody told Edward was at risk. One is from Rocky Lee, his controller, flagging a receivable ninety days past due on a job Edward sold himself. And one is from Kevin Marsh, his VP of Operations, sent at 11:47 the night before. Subject line: Need to talk about Richmond.

Kevin sent that six hours ago. Kevin, who has been here fourteen years. Kevin, who was employee number three. Kevin, who Edward has been meaning to have one honest conversation with for twenty-two months.

Edward opens it. Reads it twice. Closes his eyes.

He knows what the Richmond problem is. He knows what Kevin should have done about it. And he knows exactly why Kevin did not.

His first thought is the easy one, the one he has had a hundred mornings, that Kevin should have flagged this a week ago, that this is exactly the kind of thing Kevin lets sit. It is seven minutes past the alarm and his defenses are not all the way up yet, so the truer thought gets through right behind it, before he can stop it. He is the reason Kevin cannot solve this. He built a company that runs on Edward thinking about Kevin's job instead of Kevin learning to think without him. That one is his, not Kevin's.

He is the reason this company got as big as it is. He is the reason it stopped.

He pushes the thought down. It settles into his jaw as a dull ache. He gets up.

Alison is asleep beside him. Or holding still, which is not the same thing. She used to wake before him, coffee already going, asking what was on his plate that day. He cannot remember the week that stopped. The quiet between them is not angry. It is the quiet of a person who waited a long time for something and stopped saying out loud what it was.

He showers. Dresses in the dark. Pours coffee into a travel mug and carries it down the hall.

Jane's door is shut. A thin blue light leaks out along the carpet. She is sixteen, already awake, already somewhere inside that phone. There was a year he knew every song she loved. He stops outside her door with his hand almost raised. The words are right there. He does not knock. He keeps walking.

The twins' door is open. Grace is a lump under a blanket with one arm around a stuffed cat. Francis is sideways across his bed, one sock on, his baseball glove on the pillow beside his head where another kid would keep a stuffed animal. His backpack sits

on the chair, books in it, zipper closed. Ten years old and he packs his bag the way his father loads a truck.

Edward stands in the doorway for three seconds and feels the thing tighten in his chest that he has stopped trying to name. Francis still reaches for his hand every time they walk in from the car. Grace still finds him from across a field and waves like he is the only person in the stands. He wonders how much longer that lasts. Then he keeps walking, because the phone in his pocket is already warm and the day has already started without him.

He is in the truck by 6:15. The cab is spotless. Nothing on the floor mats, mug in the holder, phone in the cradle. He still keeps the truck right. He used to keep himself right the same way, the body, the habits, the standard, every day, with nobody making him do any of it. He is not sure when he started letting that slide, only that the truck is about the last thing left that he still holds to the old line.

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The drive to the shop is fourteen minutes, and Edward spends it the way he spends every drive. He rehearses a conversation he is never going to have.

Today it is the Kevin conversation. He has been building it in his head for almost two years. He knows the opening line. He knows the numbers cold. On-time completion sitting at eighty-one percent. Job margins bleeding five points under where they were bid. He knows the kindest way to tell a fifty-one-year-old man who gave this company his best years that the job outgrew him somewhere back around sixteen million dollars, and that the role now needs someone who can build a system instead of carry one on his back.

He has run it a hundred times. In the shower. On this drive. Across a conference table while Kevin is talking and Edward is

nodding and thinking, this week. I will do it this week.

Twenty-two months of this week.

He never does it. Not because he does not know what to say. Because he is afraid of Kevin's face when he hears it. Kevin was employee number three. Kevin was at the wedding. Kevin's wife still mails Alison a birthday card every single year.

So Edward does what he always does. He works around Kevin. He picks up the slack, solves the problems Kevin carries in, and slides Kevin's job onto his own plate one spoonful at a time, until the plate is so full he can no longer see the edge of it.

Some part of him he tries not to visit knows the truth. Carrying more was never the same as building more. Rehearsing the conversation felt like progress and cost him nothing.

It is costing him everything.

He pulls in at 6:28. Two service trucks are already in the lot. He is never the first one in anymore. It used to bother him. Now he is just grateful someone else is already handling something.

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By seven o'clock he has solved two problems that were not his to solve.

The first: a plumbing sub walked off the Richmond Place site at 6:15 over a coordination fight with the sheet-metal crew. Jake Peterson, his field superintendent, twenty-three years in the trade, called Edward directly. Not Kevin. Not the project manager. Jake called Edward, because everybody in the company knows that when a thing actually matters, you skip the middle and you call Edward.

Edward spends forty-five minutes on the phone. Fifteen with Jake to get the real story. Fifteen with the sub to talk him back onto the roof. Fifteen with the GC to smooth the schedule before it becomes a formal notice. By seven the crew is back and the GC

is calm.

The second: Megan Harrell, who runs preconstruction, catches a double-counted scope on a six-hundred-thousand-dollar medical-office bid due at noon. It is the kind of error that would have quietly erased the entire margin on the job. Megan found it at 6:40 because Megan finds everything. She is the strongest person in the building and she is running on fumes, carrying most of an estimating job nobody has filled on top of her own. She does not complain. She just goes quieter, leaves earlier on Fridays, stopped raising her hand for the extra work she used to love. Edward noticed. He filed it away. He told himself he would deal with it after the quarter.

He calls the client himself to walk the number back. The client trusts Edward. Everyone trusts Edward. That is the whole problem. They trust Edward, not All Star Mechanical. If he disappeared tomorrow, half of these relationships would wobble inside a month.

He hangs up at 7:22. Two fires out, five people handled, and it is not yet seven-thirty. He has not eaten. He has not touched a single thing on his own list.

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The nine o'clock is the meeting where Edward should feel most like the owner of the place. Five project managers around the table, eighteen million dollars a year moving through the room. This is supposed to be the engine.

It is a guessing game.

There is nothing on the wall that tells anyone how they are doing. No shared sheet anyone updated before they walked in. Each PM gives a verbal report, a loose summary of whatever they think Edward wants to hear. One talks schedule. One talks change orders. Marcus Webb talks about the deal he just closed and how



much the client loved his presentation. Nobody says the word margin. Nobody says the word cash. Not one person at the table can tell Edward whether they are winning or losing, because nobody is keeping score.

He asks anyway.

"Where are we on the Greenfield change orders?"

Andrea Walsh, his youngest PM, flips back through a notebook she fills out whether or not anyone reads it. "I think we sent three last week. I would have to check."

"What is our labor efficiency on Richmond?"

Kevin looks at his phone. "I will get that to you this afternoon."

"Do we hit margin on the Westfield job?"

Marcus leans back in his chair. "We are fine."

Edward lets it go. He always lets it go, because pushing for the answer means building the thing that produces the answer, and he has told himself for two years that he does not have time to build it.

The meeting ends at 9:47. Nothing was measured. Nothing was decided. Everyone files out feeling productive because they sat in a room together for forty-seven minutes. Edward stays behind and looks at the whiteboard. Someone wrote Q3 GOALS across the top in blue marker three months ago. Underneath it, two bullet points vague enough to mean anything at all.

Improve project delivery.

Grow revenue.

He cannot remember who wrote them. He cannot remember the last time anyone in this company looked at a goal and knew, with a number, whether they hit it.

Eighteen million dollars a year. And they are guessing.

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At 11:15 Marcus Webb walks in and drops a signed contract on Edward's desk. He is grinning.

"Northside Surgical. Six hundred grand. Signed this morning."

Marcus is good at this. He is the best closer Edward has ever had. He books more work than the next two salespeople put together, and he knows it, and he wears it like a jacket he never takes off.

"That is a great win," Edward says. And it is.

Marcus shakes his hand and walks out, and Edward picks up the contract and feels the other thing move in his gut. Because he knows what happens after Marcus's handshakes. Marcus's last three jobs are bleeding margin, the slow kind that does not show up until a job is eighty percent done and too far along to fix. Marcus does not go to the transition meetings. He hands his sold jobs to the field with numbers scrawled on the back of a business card and a phone call that amounts to figure it out. He was late to the last client walkthrough. He talked over a coordinator in front of the customer until she got up and left the room, and did not come back for ten minutes.

And on Richmond Place, the job that pulled Edward out of bed this morning, Marcus has been sitting on a hundred-and-forty-thousand-dollar overrun for three months without putting it on a single report.

Edward knows all of it. Kevin has raised it twice. Megan raised it once, carefully, the way you raise a thing when you are not sure the boss wants to hear it. Edward has done nothing. Because Marcus produces, and somewhere in the old wiring, in the place where the walk-on still lives, the kid who earned everything by out-working everyone, Edward cannot make himself hold the line on a man who puts up numbers.

He puts the contract in the file and closes the drawer.

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At 2:15 Kevin knocks on the doorframe with his yellow legal pad.  
"Got a minute?"

The problem is a two-week coverage swap. A foreman on the Westfield job cracked his wrist over the weekend and a crew has to shuffle. It is a decision Kevin has the authority, the information, and fourteen years of experience to make in his sleep. Edward makes it for him in eight minutes anyway, calls the super himself, confirms the move, done. Kevin writes it down, nods, and leaves.

And every time Edward catches one of these, he makes it worse, because Kevin learns again that the boss will always be standing under the thing to catch it.

Twenty-two months.

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At 4:15 Edward looks at the clock. Grace has a game at 4:30 at the park twelve minutes away. He can make it. He is already standing when his phone rings. It is the GC on Richmond, and it is not a fire. It is a courtesy call about a schedule change that could have waited until morning, the kind of call that runs seven minutes if you keep it short and twenty-two if you do not.

He means to keep it short. He does not. He is a man who takes the call.

He texts Alison from the truck at 4:34. Running twenty minutes late. Save me a seat.

He does not run twenty minutes late. He runs forty. By the time he jogs in from the gravel lot in his work boots and a polo that smells like coffee and cut pipe, the game is in the fourth inning. Alison is in a camp chair behind the backstop between two other moms. She does not turn around. There was a year she could feel him arrive from across a parking lot. Today she does not save him a seat. Jane is a few feet away in a folding chair, one earbud

in, actually watching her sister field ground balls. She is not gone. He just has not given her a reason to look up at him in a while.

Grace is at shortstop, glove on her knee, up on her toes, locked in on the batter the way she locks in on everything. She wants the ball hit to her. Every few pitches she checks the gate to see if he has come. This time he has. Her whole face opens up and she waves the glove at him, big and unmissable, until her coach says her name and pulls her back into the inning.

He missed everything before the fourth.

After the last out the team lines up along the fence, and the coach, a woman named Val with a whistle and the flat calm of someone who has done this a thousand times, gives them two minutes. She tells the kid who booted a grounder in the second that she watched him set his feet on the next one and field it clean. Missed one, fixed it himself, before anyone had to say a word. She names one thing each of them did well. She names the one thing to work on before Thursday. Nobody walks away from that fence unsure where they stand.

Edward watches a stranger do in two minutes with ten-year-olds the thing he has not managed with grown men in twenty-two months. And it stops him.

Val is not tougher than him. He has run through walls his whole life. She does not have more time. She has a day job and four kids of her own. But she can walk off that field and the team keeps playing, and he cannot walk out of his own building without the whole thing holding its breath.

He has spent all day being the best player on a field full of people waiting on him to make the play. She spent two minutes being a coach. He is not sure he ever learned how to be one for anything but a game.

The thought does not have a shape yet. It will not have a name for eleven more days. But it lands in the same place the ache has

been living, and for the first time the thing he is missing does not feel like a flaw in him. It feels like a thing that could be built.

Grace runs to the truck dragging a bat bag almost as long as she is. "Daddy, did you see my throw?"

"I saw it," he says. He saw one throw. "That was a rocket, Grace."

She beams and climbs in and starts telling Francis the whole story at a volume the next field could use. Jane gets in, clicks her belt, and gives him a quiet "hey, Dad" before the earbud goes back in. It is a small thing, and it is more than he has done to earn this week.

Francis reaches through the open window and grabs Edward's sleeve. "Can we get Dairy Queen?"

"Not tonight, bud. Let us get home." Francis nods but keeps hold of the sleeve until Edward opens the door.

They are almost out of the lot when Francis says it. "Dad. Did your team win it all your senior year?"

Edward finds his son's eyes in the mirror. "No, bud. We got close."

"But you were captain."

"Yeah."

"Did Coach Isaac coach you?"

Edward has not said that name out loud in fifteen years. "How do you know about Coach Isaac?"

Francis shrugs and looks out the window. "It is on the Saint Francis website. There is a picture."

Then he goes quiet, the way he does, and Edward drives home with his hands at ten and two and a name in his chest he filed away a long time ago.

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By 9:15 the twins are down and Jane's door is shut with the light still on behind it. The kitchen is spotless. A plate of chicken and rice waits in the microwave with a sticky note on the door in Alison's handwriting. Dinner. Alison is already upstairs. He can hear the TV through the ceiling, a show she started watching without him, and he cannot tell her anymore when the without-him began.

He eats standing at the counter. Cold chicken, lukewarm rice. He rinses the plate, sets it in the dishwasher, and carries nothing but himself into the home office.

The dashboard loads when he opens the laptop. Eighteen million dollars, trailing twelve months. The best year in the history of the company. His insurance broker takes him to lunch twice a year and tells him he is crushing it.

Under the revenue line sits the number he actually looks at. Net margin, six percent. On eighteen million dollars of work, in a year everyone keeps congratulating him for, the company cleared a little over a million. He has two hundred and ten thousand of that tied up in receivables he cannot get people to pay. He has field techs walking out the door faster than he can hire them. And he has a VP of Sales sitting on a hundred-and-forty-thousand-dollar hole Edward has known about since 5:37 this morning and said nothing about for three months.

He reaches into the mini fridge under the desk and opens a beer. The one Alison does not know about. Or knows about and has decided not to mention.

Eighteen million dollars, and everyone tells him he is winning. He has a word for how it actually feels, and he has never said it out loud. Not to Alison. Not to himself. Not until right now, alone in the dark, in his own house, hiding a beer from his wife.

Trapped.

He runs the day back and it is not a list of separate problems, but one problem wearing a lot of faces. Jake calling him instead of Kevin. Five managers who cannot say whether they are winning. Marcus green on the only number anyone tracks and rotten on every number nobody does. Kevin walking a decision he already knew how to make into the one office where it would get made for him. Twenty-eight of those a week. Every fire on the property routes to the same hose, and the hose has a family it keeps forgetting to get home to.

His people are not weak. He just never built anything that would let them be strong without him. Nobody in that building could tell you what good actually looks like, because he never made it plain and then held them to it. Nobody can see the truth of a job until he digs it out with his own hands. And nobody is allowed to say the hard thing to a man like Marcus, because the only one with the authority to do it is the one man who cannot make himself. He had not built a company so much as a very expensive extension of himself, and then acted surprised when it could not outrun him.

Val has all of it for a team of ten-year-olds. He has none of it for a company of seventy-five.

He takes a long pull and sets the bottle by the keyboard, and his eye catches the corner of the screen, where a second sticky note is stuck to the laptop in Alison's handwriting. Cig. Tuesday 1pm. She put it there yesterday before he left. He has not asked her what it is. He does not know if Cig is a doctor, a lawyer, or a marriage counselor. He has not peeled it off, and she has not brought it up. That yellow square is the whole marriage.

He thinks about the kid who walked on at eighteen, forty pounds light for the depth chart, with nothing going for him but a willingness to get hit, get back up, and line up again. He played safety. The last man back. The one whose whole job was making

sure nobody got behind him and nobody got hurt on his watch. By his second year the older guys had a name for him. Steady Eddie. Not because he was fast, and not because he was the most talented man on the field, because he never was. Because he lined up the same way every single rep, hit the same gap, took the same angle, and never once blew his assignment. You could set your watch by him. That kid earned a scholarship by refusing to quit and a captaincy by holding himself to a standard nobody had asked him to hold.

That kid is still in there. He has just been quiet a long time. Edward is not sure the kid would recognize the man at this desk. He is more sure of the other thing now, the thing the little-league coach handed him without knowing it. The kid already knew how to do all of this. He lived to a standard nobody made him keep. He always knew exactly where he stood. He said the hard thing to a teammate's face without flinching. He just did it for a game, and never once for the thing that has his whole life inside it.

Edward finishes the beer. He sets the empty bottle in the trash under the desk slowly, turning it so the glass does not clink. On his way out his hand stops on the light switch. There is a photo on the credenza he has not looked at in months. Grace at four on his shoulders at a tailgate, both of them mid-laugh. He looks at it for a second. Upstairs, Francis coughs once and settles. The furnace kicks on. Out in the yard the neighbor's dog barks twice and quits, and the old dog by the back door lifts its head, decides it is nothing, and lies back down.

Edward turns off the light.

He would carry this Monday around for eleven days. Until his daughter said a thing in the kitchen he could not put down, and he finally reached up, peeled the yellow note off the laptop, and picked up the phone.



## **End of Chapter One**

If you saw yourself in Edward, that is the point. When you are ready to see where you actually stand, it takes about five minutes.

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**THE FOSS METHOD**