

PART ONE - THE CRISIS

When Everything Breaks Before Anything
Makes Sense.

*“Everyone celebrates the leap. No one prepares you for the year you land on
your face and keep walking.”*

— Tim Wolter

CHAPTER 1 – 3:17 A.M.

“This isn’t a story about the first step.

It’s about the last.”

— Tim Wolter

Pain, Tenacity, True North

The kid's breathing finally evens out.

One minute they're coughing and shifting under the blanket; the next, they're out. Just a small, warm shape on the couch that has seen more code and caffeine than TV this year.

I sit there for a second with my hands on my knees, watching their face in the low light.

This is the part nobody puts in their startup threads.

They'll talk about "burn rate" and "runway."

They will not talk about telling your kid, "Hey, Christmas is going to be light this year, okay?"

They won't write a Medium post about standing in a grocery aisle, putting something back because the math doesn't work and pretending you just "changed your mind."

But those are the things you remember when an investor writes "Re: Data Room" at 2:58 A.M.

I turn back to the laptop.

Investor email.

Spreadsheet.

A barebones prototype of the data room tool I'd started hacking together for myself—something that, in my head, already had a name: DealVue.

Three windows. Three fires.

The pain is all here if you know where to look.

The savings are gone.

The deposits for the wedding? Already spent.

We walked away from a combined \$200,000+ salary for this. On purpose. While planning that wedding. In the same twelve-month span I ended up on a hospital bed with kidney stones and a gallbladder that called it quits.

That's one version of the story: the "what were you thinking?" version.

There's another version. The one that keeps me in this chair at three-something in the morning instead of scrolling job postings.

My dad calls it "true north."

My grandpa called it "have your shit in order."

My grandma just called it "doing right by people."

Same idea. Different vocabulary.

I don't get to preach that to my kids and then fold because a spreadsheet looks scary.

On the screen, the investor's bullet list waits:

- Corporate formation documents
- Cap table
- Contracts
- Financials
- Product
- Team
- IP

Each line is a test. Not just of the business, but of everything that got me here.

It would be easy to say, "This is too much." To tell myself a nice story:

You tried. It's okay. Go back to a job. Get weekends again. Get real health insurance. Let someone else worry about payroll and product-market fit.

There's a version of my life where I do that.

But there's also the version where I remember that, statistically, I wasn't supposed to get this far. I was supposed to be dead or in jail.

That's where the trajectory pointed when I was the kid hiding behind the ball wall at lunch so I didn't get nailed with dodgeballs and slurs. When my "friends" set me up with a fake dance date just to laugh at me in public.

I walked through that fire and came out the other side.

So this?

This is a different kind of fire. Legal documents. Missing contracts. Investor psychology. Asking for money in a room where you're the smallest balance sheet at the table.

It still burns. Just in quieter ways.

I look at the spreadsheet again. It's ugly, but it's progress.

The fear is there. I don't fight that. I don't pretend I'm above it. I just refuse to let it drive.

So I name what's in front of me:

This email is not "pressure."

It's a door.

On the other side of that door is one of two things:

- Money in the bank, a longer runway, and more time for Chelsie and me to build SafetyVue into what it deserves to be.
- A "no" that still leaves us with a cleaner, tighter, more real version of the company.

Both outcomes beat staying stuck.

People talk about "seeing the light at the end of the tunnel" like it's this big cinematic glow. Most of the time, it's not. Most of the time it's a pinprick. A pixel. A tiny dot you have to decide is light, even when you're not completely sure.

This email is a dot.

The kid on the couch, breathing steady, is another.

Chelsie on Slack—"Don't boil the ocean tonight"—that's a third.

You add them up and, yeah, it's still dark. But it's not pitch black.

“Alright,” I say quietly, more to myself than to the screen. “We walk through this one too.”

I flex my fingers, pull the spreadsheet front and center, and start filling in the gaps.

Not because it doesn’t hurt.

Not because I’m fearless.

But because this is what it costs to get through hell: one more step, one more document, one more 3 A.M. decision that says, I’m not done yet.

The spreadsheet fills up in slow, ugly rows.

No one is going to give me an award for how this looks. But every line I map out is one less thing hiding in the dark.

By the time I finish the “Minimum” list from the email, the clock on the stove has crawled past four.

I glance at the couch.

The kid is fully out. One arm flung over their head. Mouth slightly open. Blanket half on the floor. It’s the kind of sleep adults forget how to do.

I stand, carefully fix the blanket, and ease the laptop lid down halfway. The room drops a shade darker.

There’s a point in every night like this where your body taps you on the shoulder and says, Hey, we’re done now. You can either lie down or fall down. I’m at that point.

I walk down the hallway, past the kids’ rooms, to our bedroom.

Chelsie is a silhouette in the dim light leaking in from the hall. Hair a mess on the pillow. One hand tucked under her cheek. Calm. She’s seen every version of me: the drinking, the almost-dead, the “this guy is going nowhere” kid, the corporate climber, the founder who thought VR alone could save an industry—and this current edition,

held together by blue jeans, black shirts, and a ridiculous amount of stubborn.

I slide under the blanket as quietly as I can.

“Email?” she murmurs, eyes still closed.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “They want a full data room. Deep diligence.”

“Mmm.” She exhales. “Good. Scary, but good.”

“Yeah.”

There’s a beat of silence. I think she’s out again.

“You panicking?” she asks.

There it is. No sugarcoat.

“A little,” I say. “Spreadsheet helps.”

She lets out this half-sigh, half-laugh that’s basically our marriage in audio form.

“Of course it does,” she says. “You’ll figure it out. You always do.”

That line hits different coming from her. It’s not the fake motivational-poster version—You’ve got this! It’s a simple reading of the historical data. So far, I have figured it out. Barely. Sloppily. Late. But still.

“Try to sleep,” she adds. “You can’t sell anything if you sound like a zombie.”

“Got it,” I say.

My brain disagrees. It wants to run scenarios. Rewind rejections. Overlay worst-case outcomes like a HUD in some messed-up video game.

But my body wins this round.

The last thing I remember is staring at the faint outline of the ceiling fan and thinking, Okay. One more fire tomorrow. We've walked through worse.

The alarm hits like a brick.

7:00 A.M.

I slap it off and roll out of bed slower than I mean to. My joints feel like someone poured wet cement into them overnight. Surgery scars and startup stress make an ugly team.

Chelsie is already up. I hear her in the kitchen—mugs clinking, cabinets thudding softly. The smell of coffee hits the hallway. That's the closest thing founders get to a sunrise.

I pull on fresh jeans, a black t-shirt, and hang a suit jacket over my arm. Investor-call uniform: halfway between "I'm serious" and "I still build things for real."

In the living room, the couch situation explains itself.

The kid is sprawled out, hair everywhere, the blanket twisted around one leg.

I smile. Little couch goblin.

Chelsie passes by with a mug and stops.

"When did they migrate?" she asks.

"Cough at, like, three-something," I say. "Bad dream. Throat. Negotiated a relocation package to the couch."

She nods. No drama. Just an updated status report.

"Did you sleep at all?" she asks.

"Eventually," I say. "Got the data room mapped. Roughly."

She hands me the mug. I take it like an offering.

“This is the part nobody sees,” she says. “Investor email, sick kid, half-built deck, and somehow you still try to string complete sentences together on Zoom.”

“We,” I correct her. “We do that.”

She bumps my shoulder with hers.

“Yeah,” she says. “We.”

The kid on the couch stirs, opens one eye.

“Morning,” they say.

“Morning, sweets,” I say. “How’s the throat?”

They think about it for a second, then say, “Better. Can I stay home?”

Chelsie and I exchange a look over the top of their head. Parent telepathy. Quick mental math: mild cough + investor call + school petri dish + our remaining mental bandwidth.

“You can stay home,” she says. “Couch school today.”

The kid smiles, victorious.

I take a sip of coffee. It’s hot, strong, and just this side of bitter. Perfect.

“Big call?” Chelsie asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “They’re serious enough to ask for the real stuff. That’s something.”

“What’s the worst case?” she asks.

“They pass,” I say. “We still have a cleaner data room, a better story, and more scar tissue.”

She snorts.

“And best case?” she says.

“They wire,” I say. “We get time. SafetyVue gets another year. The kids get a Christmas with more than one present each. I remember what a paycheck feels like.”

“Good,” she says. “Aim for that. Plan for the other.”

That’s us in a sentence.

By 9:00 A.M., the house has shifted into its daytime chaos.

One kid is out the door for school. Another is at the table with a cereal bowl and a Chromebook. The couch goblin is under a blanket with a cartoon playing softly. Chelsie is in the bedroom on a separate call, her voice muffled but steady.

I’m back in my spot between the couch and the coffee table.

Laptop open. Investor deck on one side. Data room map on the other. Slack pinging occasionally with little things that feel huge when your runway is measured in months and not years—feature questions, tiny bugs, scheduling conflicts.

I’ve got my black shirt on, jeans, and the suit jacket folded over the chair, ready for go-time.

The “Re: Data Room” email is pinned in my inbox now. Staring at me from the top like a dare.

I click it open one more time, not because I need to, but because repetition steals its power. I want this email to feel boring by the time the call starts.

We’d like to move into deeper diligence.

Translation: We’re not saying yes. But we’re not saying no.

This is the middle ground where founders either level up or tap out. There’s no autopilot here. No guaranteed outcome. Just a list of documents and a clock.

I check the calendar invite.

Investor call: 11:00 A.M.

Two hours.

Enough time to tie up a few loose ends. Not enough time to become a different company. Which is good, because that's not the goal.

The goal is simple: show them we're exactly who we say we are.

Founders lie all the time. Sometimes on purpose. Sometimes because they're high on their own story.

I've done my share of pitch-deck optimism. But I decided a while back I was done bending reality past the breaking point. My past already showed me what happens when you try to hack your way around consequences. It almost put me in prison or a coffin before I was old enough to rent a car.

So I make myself a rule for this call: no pretending.

I won't hide the hard parts. I'll frame them. That's different.

We don't have millions in revenue.

We do have real customers who love what we're building.

We don't have a lead investor yet.

We do have a term sheet from one and contingent interest from others.

We haven't "crushed" anything.

We have survived long enough to matter.

That's not the kind of slide that gets applause. But I'm not going for applause. I'm going for alignment.

The kid on the couch laughs at something on the screen. A cartoon sound effect blares.

"Hey," I say. "Turn it down a little, okay? Daddy's got a big call later."

"Is it with the money people?" they ask.

"Yeah," I say.

“Tell them you’re smart,” they say. “And that you help people not get hurt.”

I smile.

“I’ll work that in,” I say.

I look at the SafetyVue strategy doc again, the line that says:

We don’t sell forms. We sell intelligence.

Then at the scribbled notes in another tab for the thing I’m quietly building for myself:

Stop losing deals to due diligence.

Two missions. One life. One bank account.

Don’t boil the ocean, the mentors said.

Too late. I’m already standing in the steam, trying to build a boat.

But here’s the thing: my “why” never changes. That’s the anchor.

Help people get home safe.

Help founders get through the last year without losing their minds.

Show my kids that a screwed-up past doesn’t disqualify you from building something better.

If I can do those three things, I can live with whatever this call does or doesn’t do.

The clock hits 10:42.

Eighteen minutes to go.

I close everything except what matters: the deck, the data room checklist, the investor Zoom link.

I slip on the suit jacket. It’s not fancy. Off-the-rack, black, a little tight in the shoulders since the surgery weight fluctuated. But it signals something, even if it’s just to me: this matters.

Chelsie pokes her head into the room.

“How you feeling?” she asks.

“Tired,” I say. “Prepared enough. Terrified. Normal.”

She nods.

“Good,” she says. “Means you’re awake.”

We trade places for a second. She steps fully into where the camera will frame us, checking the shot: bookshelf, a plant that’s barely alive, the edge of a whiteboard covered in half-erased diagrams, how is her hair.

“You look like you haven’t slept,” she says. “Which is honest. But you also look like a guy who’s not going to fold, which is more important.”

“High praise,” I say.

She leans in, gives me a quick kiss.

“Remember,” she says, “you’re not begging. You’re offering them a chance to be part of something that already exists.”

“Got it,” I say.

She starts to leave, then stops.

“And if they say no?” she asks.

“We walk through that fire too,” I say. “Just like the others.”

She smiles. That’s the answer she was looking for.

“Okay then,” she says. “Go light it up.”

She disappears down the hallway. The kid on the couch turns the volume down a notch without me asking. Little pro.

I click the Zoom link.

The spinning wheel appears.

Connecting...

I take a breath and picture that tiny dot of light at the end of the tunnel I've been walking through for years. It's not a spotlight. It's not a stadium. It's a pixel.

But it's mine.

And I'm still moving toward it.

The Zoom wheel finishes spinning.

One black square pops up. Then another. Then a third.

Logos in the corners. Names at the bottom. Partner. Associate. "Platform."

Chelsie slides back into the chair next to me, shoulder to shoulder, just like we practiced. One camera. One frame. One team.

We've been told more than once that it shows—that the way we pass the mic back and forth makes it obvious we've done the reps. We've got blooper reels on the computer of us tripping over each other, cracking up, resetting, and running it again until the timing felt like breathing.

I give it two seconds so I don't look desperate, then unmute.

"Hey, good morning," I say. "Thanks for hopping on."

They're in that classic investor setup. Neutral walls. Bookshelves. One guy with a plant that's definitely kept alive by an assistant.

"Morning, Tim. Morning, Chelsie," the partner says. "Can you hear us okay?"

"Loud and clear," I say.

"All good here," Chelsie adds with a small nod.

"Great," he says. "Thanks again for sending the initial materials. We just wanted to go a layer deeper on SafetyVue today—market, product, traction, how you're thinking about focus."

SafetyVue. Singular. Good.

“Happy to,” I say. “Appreciate you taking the time.”

I share my screen. Deck up. SafetyVue first. SafetyVue only. Our usual flow.

“I’ll keep it tight,” I say. “You’ve seen most of this, but context matters.”

They nod.

“SafetyVue,” I start, “is built on a simple idea: we don’t sell forms, we sell intelligence. The future of safety is proactive, not reactive. Instead of more paperwork after something goes wrong, we give companies the ability to see risk forming before it hits.”

Click.

Slide with SafetyVue AR: put on the glasses, scan over a job site, hazards highlighted.

“It starts with SafetyVue AR,” I say. “Five-minute JHAs. You hit record, walk the site, and our AI drafts the hazard analysis for you. Photos, OSHA citations, controls. Supervisors go from clipboards and copy-paste to actually being in the field.”

Chelsie picks it up right on cue.

“And because we’ve actually lived in operations,” she says, “we designed it so adoption doesn’t die on day two. The app is simple enough for the superintendent who hates tech, but powerful enough that your safety director still trusts the output.”

The platform rep leans closer to the screen. Tiny tell. They like product.

“On top of that,” I go on, “we’re building the data flywheel. Every inspection, every near-miss, every asset we track feeds into a single source of truth. We give companies a 360° view of their risk—equipment history, worker certifications, incidents, all connected. That’s the ‘intelligence’ we sell.”

Click.

Customer quotes. Fenton. BT Construction. Little highlights:
“Far ahead of where a lot of software is in terms of true AI.”
“Band-aids like Google Sheets aren’t cutting it.”

“Market is underserved,” I say. “Everyone agrees. Operators are stuck between expensive ERPs and spreadsheets. We’re filling a real gap: tools and safety, unified.”

The associate jumps in.

“Can you talk through traction a bit more?” he asks. “We’ve seen the pilots and interest. What does paid usage look like?”

There it is. The part of the call where PowerPoint meets reality.

“Totally,” I say. “We’ve got strong validation—demos, pilots, deep discovery work, a term sheet from Keyhorse, contingent interest from others. But you’re right: the paid side is slower than we want. Long sales cycles. Industry inertia. Implementation complexity. All the fun stuff.”

I don’t sugarcoat it.

“We’re closing paid deals,” Chelsie adds, “just not at the curve we know this can support yet. The need is loud. Budget cycles are slow. That’s the tension.”

The partner nods, just once.

“Okay,” he says. “Talk to me about focus and runway. It’s obviously a big vision. How close are you to the edge?”

There it is. The question under all the questions.

I don’t flinch.

“We’re honest about where we’re at,” I say. “We’re in what we call ‘the last year.’ Not meaning we quit if this round doesn’t happen, but meaning we don’t do another year exactly like this one. We’ve done the spending freezes. The ‘Christmas will be light’ talks. The emergency surgeries with me coding from a rolling couch desk at four A.M. because I literally couldn’t sit at my chair.”

Chelsie nods.

“We’ve walked through a lot of fire already,” she says. “Kidney stones. Gallbladder. Our friend’s accident that started this whole safety mission. Multiple iterations of the product. A hundred ‘no’s.’ We’re still here—not because we enjoy pain, but because we can see where this goes if it gets the right fuel.”

“The capital we’re raising isn’t for a dream,” I say. “It’s for an engine we’ve already built. We’ve proven the tech. We’ve proven companies want this kind of intelligence. We need fuel for sales, implementation, and partnerships so this doesn’t stay ‘interesting’ and actually becomes standard practice.”

The partner looks down at his notes. Nods slowly.

“Appreciate the transparency,” he says. “Last thing for me is personal bandwidth. Married co-founders. Kids at home. 3 A.M. work sessions. How are you thinking about that risk?”

Of course. That one always shows up.

“Totally fair,” I say. “We hear that a lot.”

Chelsie doesn’t wait to be invited.

“We also hear the opposite,” she says. “Customers and mentors tell us, ‘You can see the work in how you pitch. You can tell you’ve had the hard conversations already.’ We’re not two founders barely tolerating each other. We’re a team. That’s not a slogan—we’ve stress-tested it.”

I nod.

“We were a family before we were a cap table,” I say. “We made a pact at the kitchen table before I resigned: we separate business problems from marriage problems. We don’t weaponize the startup in arguments. We don’t put the kids on the hook for our risk.”

“And when either side needs help,” she adds, “we get it. If the business needs to pivot, we pivot it. If the marriage needs support, we get support. One doesn’t get to kill the other.”

The partner smiles at that. The platform rep does too.

“Okay,” he says. “That’s helpful. On our side, next step is to go deeper in the data room. Customer contracts, financial discipline, how you’re thinking about unit economics as this scales. If you can get that to us in one clean link, that’ll help us move quickly.”

“Totally,” I say. “We’re mapping it now. You’ll get a single, structured link with everything organized around your list by—” I glance at the date in the corner of my screen “—end of day tomorrow.”

“Sounds good,” he says. “We’ll turn it around as fast as we can. Appreciate the time, Tim. Chelsie.”

“Appreciate yours,” I say. “Thanks for the shot.”

We do the little Zoom goodbye dance. Waves. “Have a good one.” Mics click off, one by one.

The window disappears.

The quiet rushes in.

I lean back in my chair and let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding.

Chelsie steps fully into the room now, no longer half-framed by the camera.

“Well?” she asks.

“I didn’t blow it,” I say. “At least not obviously. They want the room. They’re serious. They’re also not messing around.”

She nods.

“Okay,” she says. “So we do what we always do.”

“Which is?” I ask, even though I know.

She gives me that look.

“We walk through the fire,” she says. “One document at a time.”

I laugh. It’s tired and raw, but it’s a laugh.

The kid on the couch looks up.

“Did the money people like it?” they ask.

“They liked it enough to give us more homework,” I say. “Which is progress.”

They frown.

“I don’t like homework,” they say.

“Me either,” I say. “But this kind? This is how we get to the other side of the tunnel.”

They don’t totally get it. That’s okay. They’re not supposed to yet.

I turn back to the laptop and pull up the spreadsheet again.
SafetyVue – Data Room Map_v1.

The rows are still there. The gaps are still there.

The pain is still there.

But so is the dot.

Small. Distant. Real.

“Alright,” I say quietly, more to myself than anyone else. “Let’s go.”

And I start.