THE RETURN OF

# KRAFTSMANSHIP

*It's Kooler with a K*

MATT KUEHLHORN

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Matt Kuehlhorn

*Kooler Garage Doors*

All stories told here are true.
Some details have been condensed.

It's Kooler with a K.

# A Note Before We Begin

This is a small book about a trade that has lost something, and a company trying to put it back.

If you are a homeowner, you already know the feeling I am going to describe. You have lived it. The contractor who said they would call Tuesday and called the following Friday. The technician who left a mess in your garage and called it done. The bid that came in low and the invoice that came in high.

If you work in the trades, you know the other side of that story. You know what it feels like to walk into a house that someone else has already half-finished. You know what good work looks like and what it costs. You know why the bar has dropped, and you know it should not have.

I wrote this for both of you.

It is not long. You can read it in an hour. I hope, by the end of it, you understand what we mean when we put a K where the C used to be — and why, the next time one of our trucks pulls into your driveway, you can expect something the trades used to deliver and mostly do not anymore.

One note about the word Kraftsman before you go any further. We use it for every person who earns it, regardless of gender. The word comes from old roots that meant skill and strength, not anatomy. A Kraftsman at Kooler is anyone who breaks the glass, carries the hammer, and shows up the way this book describes. That is the only requirement. It always has been.

Welcome.

*— Matt*

# Prologue: Something Is Missing

You have felt it. You may not have had a word for it. But you have felt it.

It is the contractor who did not call back. It is the installer who left before the job was finished. It is the company that was wonderful on the phone and disappointing in your driveway. It is the bid that promised one thing and the invoice that delivered another. It is the small, slow lowering of what you expect when you hire someone to work on your house.

Most homeowners have done this. You did it without noticing. You decided, somewhere along the way, that good enough was probably the best you were going to get, and you stopped expecting anything more.

I want to tell you something I have said to a lot of customers over the years.

That is not your failure. That is a reasonable response to an industry that stopped earning anything else.

The trades have a problem. It is not a labor problem. It is not a pricing problem. It is a

standard problem — and the bar has dropped so gradually that most of the people in the trade do not even know it moved. They are not cutting corners out of malice. They have simply never been shown what the corner looks like when nobody cuts it.

We have. And we built a company around it.

This book is called The Return of Kraftsmanship. You may read that and think nostalgia — leather aprons, hand tools, a slower world. That is not what this is.

The return is not backward. It is a standard, older than any of us, that got abandoned in the race to scale and cut costs and win bids on price alone. We are not romanticizing the past. We are reclaiming something that was always worth keeping.

And we spelled it differently so you would notice.

Kraftsmanship.

It's Kooler with a K.

Because this is not a history lesson. It is a declaration.

* * *

The company in these pages started with a phone call, a hockey jersey, and a two-thousand-dollar deposit. There was no grand plan. No capital. Just a decision — made early and held to since — that the work was going to matter.

What grew out of that decision is a team of people who were initiated, not just hired. Who broke a piece of glass to name what they were leaving behind. Who carry a hammer that was earned, not issued.

They show up at your home with all of that behind them.

This is the story of how it was built — and why, when one of our Kraftsmen pulls into your driveway, you can expect something different.

Not perfect. But accountable. Always.

# Chapter One: Before the Kooler

I had to be broken before I could build anything worth standing behind.

I am not being dramatic. That is the literal order of events. The man who eventually called a woman named Betsy back in 2015 had to first lose almost everything in 2011, blow tens of thousands of dollars on his own bad decisions, and file Chapter 7 bankruptcy on a Wednesday morning in February of 2013.

If you skip that part, the rest of it sounds like luck. It was not luck. It was tuition.

* * *

My wife and I came into 2011 debt free. We had earned it. One young daughter at home, a second baby on the way — we did not know who yet — and a small home loan we had somehow secured. By March of that year the student loans were gone and the credit cards were at zero. We were clean.

By September I was carrying over fifty thousand dollars in credit card debt and looking at bankruptcy.

I was earning thirty thousand dollars a year.

That math does not add up. The reason it does not add up is that I had decided I was going to become a millionaire by buying my way into rooms that promised to teach me how.

I remember walking out of a free conference in March of 2011 with an armful of books that came with my new membership. T. Harv Eker's Millionaire Mind. Fifteen thousand dollars for twenty-four books and access to the year's trainings. I put the box in the back of a white Ford Escort, opened my flip phone, and tapped play on a voicemail my wife had left.

*Wump. Wump. Wump. Wump.*

It was the first time I heard my son's heartbeat.

Standing in a hotel parking lot. Holding a box of books I had just put on a credit card I could not pay. Listening to a heartbeat that belonged to a kid who did not know yet that his dad had just done something stupid.

I cried in the parking lot.

And then I kept buying.

I went to more events. I joined a coaching program called Excuses or Results. I cannot remember my coach's name — that is how present I was in my own life that year — but the format

was simple. Weekly accountability call. Did you do what you said you would do, or did you not.

I bought a marketing intensive. I bought real estate sales coaching. I attended a session where I blacked out on stage. I rapped in front of four hundred people. I learned to fight, literally, in a workshop, and applied it figuratively to a vision I called Fire Ceremony Camp, which I pitched in front of eight hundred people to a standing ovation, with T. Harv Eker himself jokingly offering to buy me out for a hundred million dollars from the front of the room.

None of it produced a dollar.

I was performing growth, not doing it.

* * *

Then I met Keith Cunningham.

If you do not know the name, Keith was the actual Rich Dad. The real person Robert Kiyosaki later turned into a character in his books. The man who taught Kiyosaki most of what Kiyosaki then monetized. Keith was, and is, one of the most respected business minds in the country. He did not fill rooms with hype. He filled them with arithmetic.

I had fought my way to the front row of his event. Maybe second row, maybe third — I always go for

the front. Keith stepped onstage and started scanning the crowd, doing what good speakers do, locking eyes with people one at a time to find the room's pulse.

When his eyes hit mine, I dropped my head.

I could not hold his gaze.

I knew, in that exact second, that I had been fooling myself for a year. Every other room I had walked into that year, I had walked in puffed up, ready to be the one on the stage. Keith saw through it before he said a word, and my body knew it before my brain did.

I bowed.

I signed up for two of his programs. I paid him another twenty thousand dollars on the same credit cards. Months later, at the end of one of those programs, Keith pulled me aside and asked me a question.

*Are you ready?*

I had been up most of the night before, preparing for that morning without knowing why. I had been humbled. I had been beaten. I had stopped pretending I had it figured out.

I looked him in the eye this time.

*Yes.*

That was the moment the Kooler was born. Not in 2015, when I called Betsy. In 2012, when I finally stopped lying to myself in a hotel ballroom in front of a man who had seen the lie immediately.

* * *

February 11th, 2013 was my court date. Chapter 7. Ten minutes. Almost painless. The trustee asked a few questions, signed a few documents, and it was over. I kept everything I had bought, because none of it was worth coming after. The debt was gone. The lesson cost me fifty thousand dollars plus interest plus four years of my early thirties, and I would pay it again to learn what I learned.

I want to be honest with you about why this part of the story belongs in a book about a garage door company.

You cannot build a company called Kraftsmanship on top of a founder who has not been humbled. The whole standard collapses the first time the founder gets challenged. I needed to lose the version of me that thought he was going to be a millionaire because he had bought the books.

That version of me filed Chapter 7 and did not come back.

* * *

After Keith, I needed a job. I needed health insurance. I needed a paycheck that would clear.

Because of youth mentoring work I had done — and because Colorado was about to legalize cannabis and the county needed someone certified to run prevention programming — I qualified for an opening at the Gunnison County Substance Abuse Prevention Project. Director-level. Fully grant funded, which meant I was also responsible for the funding.

I went in with zero grant-writing experience and locked in over a million dollars over the next two years.

I hit every target the role had. I grew the coalition. I learned to box on the side, played hockey in the gentlemen's beer league, and parented two small kids. And the moment I hit the targets, I could not stand being there.

The county culture was a recipe for mediocrity. Tenure over performance. Security over results. Once I got comfortable, I started wanting to lead — and at a county institution, that is not a ladder you climb. It is a wall you run into.

I left at the end of 2014 with no backup plan and no net. I had done it before. I would do it again.

What came next was almost the same mistake.

I started an enterprise in January 2015 called Community Thrive. It went through several variations, became a nonprofit with a national board, won a fifteen-thousand-dollar grant from the Drug Policy Alliance. I was selling state license plates at seventy-five dollars apiece to keep the lights on.

It fell apart without a funding mechanism.

I was running out of money again. Looking at bankruptcy again. Except this time I had two kids and a wife depending on me and no county paycheck on the way.

A buddy invited me to roll out the walls of a spec home for twenty dollars an hour.

I said yes immediately.

Twenty dollars an hour was twenty more than I had. And after Keith, I had finally learned the difference between a real opportunity and a story about one.

The spec home is where the next chapter begins.

But the person who walked into that spec home was not the person who had walked into T. Harv's seminar four years earlier.

The seminar version of me was performing. The spec home version was paying attention.

The seminar version bought books. The spec home version bought a roller and asked the other painter how to cut a line.

# Chapter Two: The Kooler

The spec home taught me something I did not go there to learn.

I was bad. Genuinely bad. Thin walls, rough lines, the kind of work that would embarrass a professional. But I have always had one thing going for me. I know how I learn. I know how to find people who know what I need to know, build a relationship fast, and extract what matters.

So I started learning. I watched. I asked. I practiced the cut lines until they got clean, then cleaner, then almost automatic. And somewhere in that process — not dramatically, not with any big moment of realization — I started to care about the wall itself. Not just about getting it done. About getting it right.

That is the C in craftsmanship. The trade. The technique. Doing the thing well because the thing deserves to be done well.

I was just starting to find it when everything changed.

* * *

I saw a Facebook post. Spring of 2015.

An old landlord of ours — my wife and I had rented from her — was looking to get her house painted. Classic Gunnison County farmhouse. Asbestos shingles. Lead-based paint on the windows. The kind of house that needed someone who knew what they were doing, or at least knew enough to find out.

Let me stop here and tell you something I have learned in ten years of walking into people's homes.

A house tells you what it needs. You just have to know how to listen to it. An asbestos shingle is not a problem. It is a piece of information. Lead paint on a window is not a problem. It is a piece of information. Both of them are telling you the age of the house, the era it was built in, and what the next person who works on it needs to be certified to handle.

Most contractors do not listen to that. They see an asbestos shingle and they see a hassle. They see lead paint and they see paperwork. So they cut around it, or they pretend they did not see it, or they bid the job as if the materials are clean and then improvise when they find out they are not.

A Kraftsman does not improvise on a house. A Kraftsman does the homework before writing the bid.

* * *

Betsy could not get anybody to call her back.

And I thought to myself, I could call her back.

That was the entire business plan. The whole strategy. A woman needed a painter, and I had a phone, and I was willing to use it. The bar in the trades was on the floor — not just low, on the floor — and the only thing required to clear it was basic human decency. Return the call.

I called Betsy. We talked. I did some research. I put together a one-page contract.

That contract still sits in the office today. Day three on the job lives as the cover photo.

For eight thousand five hundred dollars, I was going to repaint Betsy's house. But first — because even then, even at the very beginning, this is who I am — I did it right. The asbestos shingles and lead paint meant I needed EPA certification. So I took the course. Got certified. Got licensed.

I want you to notice something about that sequence.

The cheap version of getting that job goes like this. You bid the work. You scrape what you have to scrape. You hope no inspector shows up. You collect the check and you move on. Plenty of contractors do exactly that. It is how lead dust ends up in the backyards of houses with children.

The Kraftsman version goes like this. You read the house. You see what it has. You go get the certification before you touch a brush. You bid the job around doing it the right way, and you charge for the right-way version, and if the customer says no, you walk.

Betsy did not say no.

We don't cut corners. We never have. Not on the first job. Not now. That is not a policy we wrote later. That is just what doing things right looks like, from day one.

Betsy's house still has not been repainted. You can drive by it today. There have been additions painted to match — and the new coatings do not hold color as well as what we put on in 2015. Because we used quality paint, the kind that holds in high-altitude UV, because I had learned enough to know that mattered.

That first house, done right, is still standing as proof.

*Betsy's house, 2021. Still holding. Painted in 2015 with the right paint, for the right reasons. The proof that started everything.*

* * *

I negotiated a two-thousand-dollar deposit up front. That deposit had to cover everything.

EPA license. LLC formation. A five-dollar logo I commissioned online. Three-quarter-cut jersey T-shirts, silk-screened blue and white. And — because I had never used a paint sprayer in my

life and the job started the next morning — twenty-five dollars an hour to a contractor who knew how to run one.

He came over. We worked the pump for eight hours. How to throttle it on. How to throttle it down. How to clean it. How to control the spray pattern. I paid him cash, snapped a photo of him in my new company T-shirt, and he was gone by sundown.

He never came back.

But the colors stayed.

Blue and white. On day one. Before revenue. Before a track record. Before anything that could justify a uniform.

I get asked about that sometimes. Why spend money you do not have on shirts when you have not earned a dollar?

The answer is that I understood something I could not yet put into words. The signal you send the moment you pull into someone's driveway is the product. The uniform says we came here on purpose. It says this is not a side hustle. It says you can trust what is about to happen in your home.

I did not have the language for that yet. I just knew I was not going to show up looking like I did not care.

* * *

The name came off the back of a hockey jersey.

Gunnison gentlemen's beer league. They called me the Kooler — not because I was the best skater or the hardest shooter, but because I had a way of keeping things loose. Easy. I could walk into a room and adjust the temperature of it. That was the identity before it was a brand.

The Kooler became Kooler. It's Kooler with a K. And half the builders I skated with would see my name on the side of a truck and remember the guy who kept the locker room loose.

That hockey jersey hangs in the office today. Right next to the one-page contract from Betsy's house.

The first rig was a 1996 Toyota Previa van. Then a Chevy pickup with a front-bumper winch.

Then Princess.

Princess is a 1994 Ford F-250 I bought from Steve at Precision Automotive for four thousand nine hundred and ninety-five dollars. That was a lot of money in 2016. That was the biggest purchase I had made for the business by a wide margin. She was the first real door truck — the first vehicle that said, this is not someone with a van, this is a company.

Princess is still around. She has earned every mile.

* * *

By November of 2015 I had decided paint was not enough.

I had been noticing garage doors. A company that had been servicing the valley had pulled out. There was a gap. I knew enough to be dangerous and not much more — but I knew that a homeowner with a broken garage door is a homeowner who cannot get into their own house, and that the same standard that worked for paint would work for a problem that urgent.

I want to teach you something here, because if you are reading this you probably have a garage door, and most of you do not know what is really going on inside it.

A garage door is the largest moving part of your house. It cycles thousands of times a year. It is held in tension by springs that can release with enough force to break a wrist. It is supported by rollers, hinges, and cables, every one of which has a service life. And it is operated by a small motor that, depending on the door itself, is either lifting fifty pounds or one hundred and fifty.

Most homeowners only think about the door when it stops working. By then, the cheap repair is often

gone — because the part that broke broke because the part next to it was already failing, and the part next to that was already failing, and the whole assembly has been telling the door for a year that something needs to be replaced.

A good technician walks in and reads the door before quoting the repair. They look at the springs. They look at the cable, where it meets the drum, where it meets the bottom bracket. They listen to the opener as it lifts. They notice whether the door is balanced. They notice whether the rollers are dry, or cracked, or original. They notice whether the rail on the opener is flexing under load.

And then they tell you, plainly, what the door needs — not what you came in expecting to hear.

That is how we have always done it. Not because we read a manual that said so. Because in 2015 I was walking into garage after garage with one good year of paint experience behind me and a determination not to insult anybody's house with bad work.

* * *

I had been chasing Steve Adams at Raynor Garage Doors for four months trying to get him to give me a shot at dealer pricing. Four months of phone calls and follow-ups. He finally said yes sitting at

the bar of Palisades — the restaurant across the street from what would, years later, become my shop.

The first commercial door job I closed under that relationship was thirty thousand dollars.

That single job got us through our first winter.

If Steve had said no — or if I had given up after month two — there is no Kooler Garage Doors. There is a person who paints houses in Gunnison County, and that is the end of the story.

He did not say no. I did not give up. We made it to spring.

* * *

The first few years grew faster than they had any right to. Sloppy at times. Fast hires, fast mistakes, fast lessons. People came through and left. Some of them should not have been hired. Some of them I should have kept longer than I did.

The one who stayed was Pascual.

Pascual showed up early, and he is still here. He is the longest-tenured Kraftsman on the team. When the company was three people and a paint sprayer, he was one of them. When the company crosses a hundred trucks, he will still be the standard everyone else is measured against.

Pascual was first. And the fact that he stayed — through the growth, through the mistakes, through every version of this company that came before the one you are reading about — is part of why the standard is what it is.

You do not build Kraftsmanship by hiring fast. You build it by earning the people who decide to stay.

* * *

I was in my mid-thirties at this point. Running on fear and forward momentum.

My kids were still young. We were in a rural part of Colorado with no margin for error. I needed this to work, not because of ambition — ambition came later — but because my family needed me to figure it out.

Fear is underrated as a teacher. It cuts through the noise. When there is no safety net, you learn fast, you stay humble, and you do not take shortcuts because you cannot afford to fix the consequences.

That urgency — that you-better-do-this-right-beca use-there-is-no-second-chance energy — became the standard. And the standard became the brand. And the brand became the company.

The two-thousand-dollar deposit. The five-dollar logo. The name off a hockey jersey. The one-page contract. The 1994 F-250 named Princess. The four months of phone calls to Steve Adams. The day Pascual showed up and did not leave.

That is what Kooler was built on.

Not genius. Not capital. Not a perfect plan.

A founder who had been broken, and who was finally honest about it, with a phone, a uniform, and the decision — made before there was any good reason to make it — that the work was going to matter.

And so would my word.

# Chapter Three: The Guarantee That Does Not Expire

I want to tell you about Ray's hangar.

Ray is a friend. He flies planes — loves them the way some people love horses or boats, with a kind of reverence that goes past the machine itself. He was building a hangar at the airport. Brand new. Big, clean, beautiful concrete, the kind of slab you only get to pour once. He wanted a pure gray epoxy floor. Showroom finish. A place worthy of the airplanes that would live in it.

I told him we could do it.

I want to be careful about how I say what comes next, because the truth is unglamorous and I do not want to dress it up.

I had been growing the company for a few years at that point. Garage doors were the core of what we did, but I was hungry. I kept finding ways to do more. Cabinets. Storage. Paint. Epoxy floors. Every job, I would push to deliver something the customer had not expected, and most of the time it worked. I have a streak in me — anyone who has started a company has it — that says, I can figure

this out.

I could grind concrete. I could read a moisture spec sheet. I could mix epoxy. How hard could a hangar be?

So when Ray asked, I said yes.

And to be clear, I did the work right, in the way I knew how to do it right. I tested the concrete. I sealed the cracks. I brought in a thermal camera to map the radiant heat coils so we would not damage anything when we ground the surface. I tested moisture levels. I talked to people who knew more than I did. I prepared the way a Kraftsman prepares.

Pour day came. We were on site for hours — grinding, sealing, prepping. And then we poured.

And we ran short. By about twenty square feet. A little patch near the entrance. We mixed more, finished the floor, and it did not lay down quite as smooth in that spot as the rest. But the floor looked good. Ray was happy. We shook hands. I drove away from that hangar feeling like someone who had stretched and made it.

Three weeks later, Ray called. There were bubbles in the floor.

I went out. We tried to address them. The bubbles kept coming. The floor was failing, and it was not going to stop failing, and the more I looked at it,

the more I understood that this was not a small fix. The floor needed to come up. The whole thing. It needed to be ground off the slab and redone from zero.

That was the moment.

* * *

I want to slow down here, because this is the part of the story that I think most companies get wrong.

The easy move — the move I have watched a hundred contractors make — would have been to do the rework myself. Eat the cost. Bring my crew back. Grind it off, pour it again, hope it holds this time. That is what you do when ego is driving. You stay in the job because admitting you cannot fix it is harder than throwing more money at it.

I sat with it for a while. And I realized something I did not want to realize.

I was not the person who could get Ray a win on this floor.

I had stretched past my skill zone. I had told myself I could do something, and I had done it the best I knew how, and the best I knew how was not good enough for what Ray deserved. The proof was the bubbles. The proof was the slab. The floor was telling me what I did not want to hear.

A Kraftsman has to be willing to hear it.

So I did something I did not expect to do when I started that morning. I called a competitor. A company that did epoxy floors better than I did. I told them what happened. I asked them to come do Ray's floor — the right way, by people who lived in that work the way I lived in garage doors.

And then I wrote them a check for thirty-two thousand dollars.

* * *

I want you to sit with that for a second.

I did not write a check to Ray. I wrote a check to the company that was going to do what I could not.

Most contractors will not do this. I want to be honest about that. Most contractors, when a job fails, will do everything in their power to keep the job in-house — to fix it themselves, to argue about who is at fault, to drag it out, to hope the customer gets tired and accepts something less than what they were promised.

Ego is expensive. Pride is expensive. Both of them are paid for, in the end, by the customer.

I did not have it in me to make Ray pay for my pride.

The check hurt. Thirty-two thousand dollars is real money. And the harder part was not even the money. It was admitting, out loud, in writing, on a contract with a competitor, that I was not the right person for this job. There is a particular kind of swallowing that has to happen for a founder to do that. I would be lying if I told you it was easy.

Here is the principle Ray's hangar taught me, the one I had been operating on by instinct for years before I had words for it.

*The customer never pays for our failure.*

Not in dollars. Not in time. Not in the slow grinding feeling of being made to fight for what you were already promised.

If we miss, we cover it. If we cannot fix it ourselves, we hire whoever can — and we pay them, not you. If the job takes longer than we said it would, the difference comes out of our margin, not your wallet. If something we installed today fails ten years from now, you pick up the phone and we come back.

That last one is the part most companies will not say out loud. So I am going to.

*The Kooler guarantee does not expire.*

Not after a year. Not after the warranty card runs out. Not after the manufacturer stops returning your calls. Not because we feel like it on a

Tuesday and not because we do not on a Thursday.

If we did the work, we stand behind it. If something we touched is failing, we make it right. The clock on that commitment does not start the day we shake hands, and it does not end the day a piece of paper says it does. The clock does not exist.

I want to be specific about what that means, because guarantees are cheap until they get tested.

It means: if you call us five years after we hung your door and the spring snaps in a way it should not have, we come. If you sell your house and the new owners call us because something we installed is not behaving right, we come. If our installer made a call on your job that we would make differently today with what we know now, and that call is what is failing — we come.

We do not hide behind fine print. We do not have fine print. We have one page, the same kind of one-page contract Betsy signed in 2015, and the promise on that page is the same promise that wrote a check for thirty-two thousand dollars to a competitor: whatever it takes to get the customer a win.

* * *

Ray and I are still friends. That is the part of the story I am proudest of, and I want to tell you why.

If I had handled that floor the way most contractors handle a failure — argued, delayed, half-fixed, blamed the concrete — Ray would still have his floor eventually. But he would not have called me a friend. He would not have taken my son flying. He would not pick up the phone when I called. The relationship would have survived as a transaction and died as a friendship, and I would have spent the next ten years driving past his hangar avoiding his eyes.

Instead, the floor is beautiful. Ray loves it. And when my boy wanted to see what an airplane felt like from the inside, Ray was the one who took him up.

I think about that a lot.

The thirty-two thousand dollars bought a lot of things. It bought Ray a floor. It bought my company a story. It bought me, more than anything, the right to keep being the kind of person Ray would call a friend.

That is the math no contract can capture, and it is the only math I care about.

* * *

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

When you hire Kooler, you are hiring people who will tell you the truth. Sometimes the truth is yes, we can do this and here is how. Sometimes the truth is we tried, we missed, and the right way to make this right is to bring in someone better.

Both are Kraftsmanship. Both are integrity. The first one is easy. The second one is the test.

I have failed jobs in my career. I will fail more. I will not promise you that the people who wear our shirt will never make a mistake.

I will promise you this.

When we do, you will not be the one who pays for it. Not in dollars. Not in time. Not in the slow grinding feeling of being made to fight for what you were already promised.

You will get a phone call answered. You will get a person at your door. You will get the floor — or the door, or the opener, or whatever it is — restored to what it should have been on the day we shook hands.

And on the rare day that the right thing to do is hand the work to someone better than us, we will do that, and we will pay for it, and you will never know the check was written unless we tell you.

That is the guarantee that does not expire.

It is the most expensive lesson I ever learned, and the cheapest investment I ever made.

# Chapter Four: The Tenaz and the Glass

A guarantee is only as good as the people who keep it.

I can write the customer never pays for our failure on every page of this booklet, and on the back of every truck, and on the wall of every shop. It means nothing if the person who shows up at your house does not carry the same standard in their chest when no one is watching.

So the harder question — the one that kept me up at night for years — is this.

How do you build a company full of people who will write the check to the competitor when the founder is not in the room?

You cannot hire it. You cannot train it. You cannot post it on a wall and hope it sticks.

You have to build a system that selects for it, names it, rewards it, and refuses to compromise on it.

That system has three parts.

## The Apprenticeship

We do not hire Kraftsmen. We hire candidates.

The first three months at Kooler are not employment in the way most people mean the word. They are an apprenticeship — which is a softer word than what is actually happening. What is actually happening is a test. Both directions.

We are watching. They are watching. Neither side has made a decision yet.

We are not testing whether a candidate can swing a hammer. Almost anyone can be taught to swing a hammer. We are testing something harder. Whether they are a values-level player.

I will tell you exactly what we are looking for, because we have named it, and naming it is half the work.

*We do what we say we will do.*

The first three months, we watch what happens between a person's word and a person's action. Did they say they would be there at 7:00? Were they there at 7:00? Did they say they would bring the parts? Did they bring the parts? Did they say they would call the customer back? Did they call the customer back?

This is not about competence. This is about gravity. Someone whose word and action do not pull in the same direction will eventually pull the company apart. Skill we can build. Gravity we

cannot install.

*We do the nitty gritty.*

There is a kind of work in every job that nobody wants to do. The cleanup. The detail nobody sees. The five minutes of effort at the end of an eight-hour install that turns a good job into a great one. We are watching to see who treats those five minutes as optional, and who treats them as the whole point.

Most people leave the nitty gritty for someone else. A Kraftsman handles it personally, on the way out, before getting in the truck.

*We grow.*

Three months in, we want to see whether a candidate is the same person they were on day one, or a better one. Did they ask questions? Did they take feedback? Did they get faster, cleaner, more confident? Did they get humbler when they should have, and louder when they should have?

A person who is the same in March as they were in January is a person who is going to be the same in five years. We are not building a company of people who are the same in five years. We are building a company of people who are unrecognizable in five years.

*We play to create win-win-win.*

The customer wins. The company wins. The Kraftsman wins. Three wins, not one, not two. We watch a candidate during the three months to see whether they understand that the deal is not done until all three are in the bag. Whether they can see past the close to the relationship. Whether they can resist the trade-off most contractors take by default — the customer loses so the company can win, or the company loses so the Kraftsman can feel good, or the Kraftsman loses so the customer can feel taken care of.

Win-win-win is harder. It is also the only durable game.

These four — we do what we say, we do the nitty gritty, we grow, we play to create win-win-win — are not values in the corporate sense. They are not on a poster. They are not in a handbook chapter no one reads.

They are the four things we are actively watching for during ninety days. And the candidate is watching us back — watching whether we live them when the customer is not looking, whether the founder lives them when the camera is off, whether the supervisor lives them at 4:55 on a Friday.

Most people do not make it through the three months. That is the point.

We are not building the biggest company in the trades. We are building the one with the highest floor.

## The Glass

If you make it through the three months — if both sides have made the decision, the company and the candidate — there is a ceremony.

It is one of the simplest rituals in the entire company.

A piece of glass is placed in front of the candidate.

They write one word on it.

One word. The word that names what they are leaving behind to become a Kraftsman. It might be 'fear'. It might be 'average'. It might be 'complacency'. It might be the version of them that did not return phone calls. Whatever it is, it has to be true, and they have to write it themselves.

Then they break the glass.

That is it. That is the whole ceremony.

We do a credo and we get excited. The team is in the room. The candidate writes their word. They break the glass. And then — only then — the apprenticeship ends and the real one begins.

I want to be specific about why we do this, because rituals only matter when the people performing them understand what they are for.

The three months before the glass is the company deciding whether the candidate is in. The glass is the candidate deciding whether the company is in. There is a moment, right before the swing comes down, where every Kraftsman who has ever broken a piece of glass at Kooler has had the same thought — am I sure? And then the glass breaks and the question is gone, because you cannot unbreak it.

The breaking is the commitment. Not the welcome.

## The Tenaz

There is a word in Spanish — tenaz — that means tenacious. Stubborn in the right way. Refusing to let go of what matters even when it would be easier to.

It is also the root of the word that hangs above everything we do.

TENACITY is the umbrella over the four values. It is what we do what we say, we do the nitty gritty, we grow, we play to create win-win-win add up to when you live them long enough that they stop being a list and start being a person.

Once a quarter, the team gives the Tenaz Award.

The Tenaz is not a manager's award. The Tenaz is not chosen by me. The Tenaz is chosen by the team — by the Kraftsmen themselves — and it goes to the one person, that quarter, who best embodied the four values. The one who did what they said. Who did the nitty gritty when no one was watching. Who grew when it was hard to grow. Who played the longer game so that all three wins landed.

There is no scoreboard for this. There is no metric. There is no formula. The team simply knows. And every quarter, they choose.

I want to tell you why this matters more than any leadership decision I have made.

The Tenaz is the team policing the standard, not me. The team naming the standard, not me. The team rewarding the standard, not me.

In the early years of any company, the founder is the standard. The founder has to be — there is no one else. But a company where the founder is the standard forever is a company that cannot scale, cannot survive the founder, cannot mean anything outside the room the founder is in.

The Tenaz is how the standard gets out of my chest and into the team's. Every quarter, four times a year, the Kraftsmen look at each other and decide who carried the company's name best. And the person who wins it does not only win a trophy. They win the acknowledgment of the only people in the world whose acknowledgment matters on this question — the people who do the work next to them.

I have watched Kraftsmen tear up receiving the Tenaz. Not because the prize is large. Because the prize is real.

# Chapter Five: The Hammer

The glass breaks. The candidate is no longer a candidate.

What happens next is the part of the ceremony that does not end when the room clears.

They are handed a hammer.

Not a hammer pulled from a shelf an hour before. Not a hammer that came with the job. A hammer made for them, by us, the day they earned it. Blacked-out finish. Branded with the company mark. And on the side, in clean letters etched into the steel, three words.

*We got you.*

That is the hammer they carry from that day forward. It is theirs. They keep it. It does not go back in the truck at the end of the week. It does not get reassigned when they leave. When they retire from Kooler — whenever that is, however many years from now — the hammer goes home with them, and the words on it go with them too.

* * *

I want to be honest about why we made the hammer this way, because the temptation in any company is to hand out branded swag and call it

culture.

This is not swag.

A hammer is the oldest tool in the trades. It is the symbol of building, of repair, of doing the work with your hands. To hand someone a hammer is to say, you are one of the people who builds things now. That sentence does not need translation. Anyone who has ever swung one knows what it means.

But the hammer alone is only half of it. The other half is the engraving.

*We got you.*

Three words. Read them in any direction.

Read them as the company speaking to the Kraftsman: We got you. We hired you. We watched you for ninety days. We chose you. Whatever happens out there, we are behind you.

Read them as the Kraftsman speaking to the customer: We got you. Your door, your floor, your home, your problem — we got it. You do not have to chase us. You do not have to worry. We came here to handle it.

Read them as the Kraftsman speaking to themselves, on a hard day, on a job that is testing them: I got this. I was given this hammer because someone decided I was the kind of person who

carries this kind of weight. So I carry it.

All three readings are true. That is why the words are on the hammer. Not as decoration. As the operating instruction.

* * *

There is a thing that happens with a Kraftsman after the hammer is earned that I did not predict and did not engineer.

They start carrying it differently than other tools.

Other tools go in the bag, get used, get put back. The hammer earns a spot. On the workbench at home. On a shelf in the garage. In a few cases I know of, on a wall in the living room, where the family can see it. The hammer becomes evidence.

Evidence of what? Of a moment. The moment they walked in front of their team, wrote a word on a piece of glass, broke it, and were handed something on the other side that said, you are one of us now. The hammer is the physical proof that the moment happened.

I think about this when a Kraftsman pulls into your driveway. Somewhere in their life — in their truck, in their garage, on a shelf at home — there is a hammer with three words on it that they earned by going through something most people will never go through, to do a job most people will

never understand the cost of.

They brought that hammer to your house with them in spirit, even if it stayed home.

That is what is in the truck.

* * *

So here is what is happening, beneath the surface, every time a Kooler truck pulls into your driveway.

The person stepping out has been watched for ninety days by people who were watching for one thing — whether they were a values-level player.

They have broken a piece of glass in front of their team to name what they were leaving behind.

They have been handed a hammer with we got you engraved on it, and they carry the meaning of those three words into your home whether they are holding the hammer or not.

And every quarter, the team they work with decides — without input from me, without input from their manager — whether they are still living the four things we said we would live by.

That is what is in the truck.

That is what is in the uniform.

That is the system that makes the guarantee in chapter three keepable.

A guarantee is only as good as the people who keep it. We do not ask you to take our word for it. We built a company that selects for the kind of person who would have written Ray's thirty-two-thousand-dollar check themselves if they had been the one standing in the hangar that day.

Most of them would have.

That is not an accident.

That is the system.

# Epilogue

I started this book by telling you that something is missing.

I want to end it by being clear about what we are putting back.

Not perfection. Not theater. Not a company that claims it never fails. Read chapter three again if you forgot — we fail, and when we do, we cover it, and the cover is real, not a coupon.

What we are putting back is a standard. The standard that says when a tradesperson tells you they will be there, they are there. When they tell you they will fix it, they fix it. When they tell you it is done, it is done — not approximately done, not done enough, not done if you do not look too closely. Done.

The trades had this once. I do not think anyone alive remembers exactly when it left. I think it left slowly, the way most standards leave — one cut corner at a time, one missed call at a time, one good-enough at a time, until the floor was so low that returning a phone call was enough to be the best contractor someone had ever hired.

That is the bar Kooler started with. And it is the bar we have been raising, deliberately, since the

day I called Betsy back.

* * *

I want you to look at the photos at the back of this book.

Those are Kraftsmen. Each one earned the right to be in there. Each one stood in front of their team, wrote a word on a piece of glass, broke it, and walked through the other side. Each one carries a hammer with three words on it.

They are the company. I am not.

I am the one who started it, and the one who will run it as long as it needs running, and the one whose name is on the loan documents. But the company is them. When one of them pulls up to your house, the company is in the truck.

I wanted you to know their faces. I wanted you to know that the people who do the work are people, not crews, not bodies on a schedule. They have names. They have stories. They had a moment when they decided to leave something behind and be one of these.

I wanted you to see them, so that the next time one of them is in your driveway, you know who you are looking at.

* * *

Here is what I will promise you, in writing, with my name on it.

If you hire Kooler, the person who shows up is someone who was chosen, not just hired.

The work they do is backed by a guarantee that does not expire — not in a year, not in ten years, not when the warranty card runs out, not ever.

If we miss, we cover it. If we cannot cover it ourselves, we hire whoever can, and we pay them, and you will never see the bill.

If something we did five years ago is failing today, you pick up the phone and we come.

That is the deal. It is the same one-page deal Betsy signed in 2015. It will be the same deal when the company has fifty trucks, and a hundred trucks, and a Kraftsman in every market we serve.

The K in Kraftsmanship is not a gimmick. It is the mark on the hammer. It is the line on the contract. It is the way we spell what most companies stopped doing.

* * *

I want to leave you with something I have not been able to put down since 2011.

*Wump. Wump. Wump. Wump.*

My boy is grown now. He has heard the story. He has seen the trucks. He knows the man his father was in that parking lot, and he knows the man his father became after.

I think about that heartbeat almost every day. Not as a memory. As a metronome.

Because that is the question, isn't it. The only one that matters at the end of any of this. Did the work mean something. Did the name mean something. Did the man behind the name live up to the beat that was given to him.

Kraftsmanship is not about doors. It is not about floors. It is not about the trade.

Kraftsmanship is about building a life worth dying for.

A life where the work you did still stands after you are gone. A life where the people you trained carry the standard further than you ever could. A life where, on the day they put you in the ground, someone can drive past a house you painted in 2015 and say, that one is still holding.

That is the standard. That is the K.

And that little beat — the one I heard in a parking lot holding a box of books I could not pay for — is the reason any of it is here.

* * *

Welcome to Kooler.

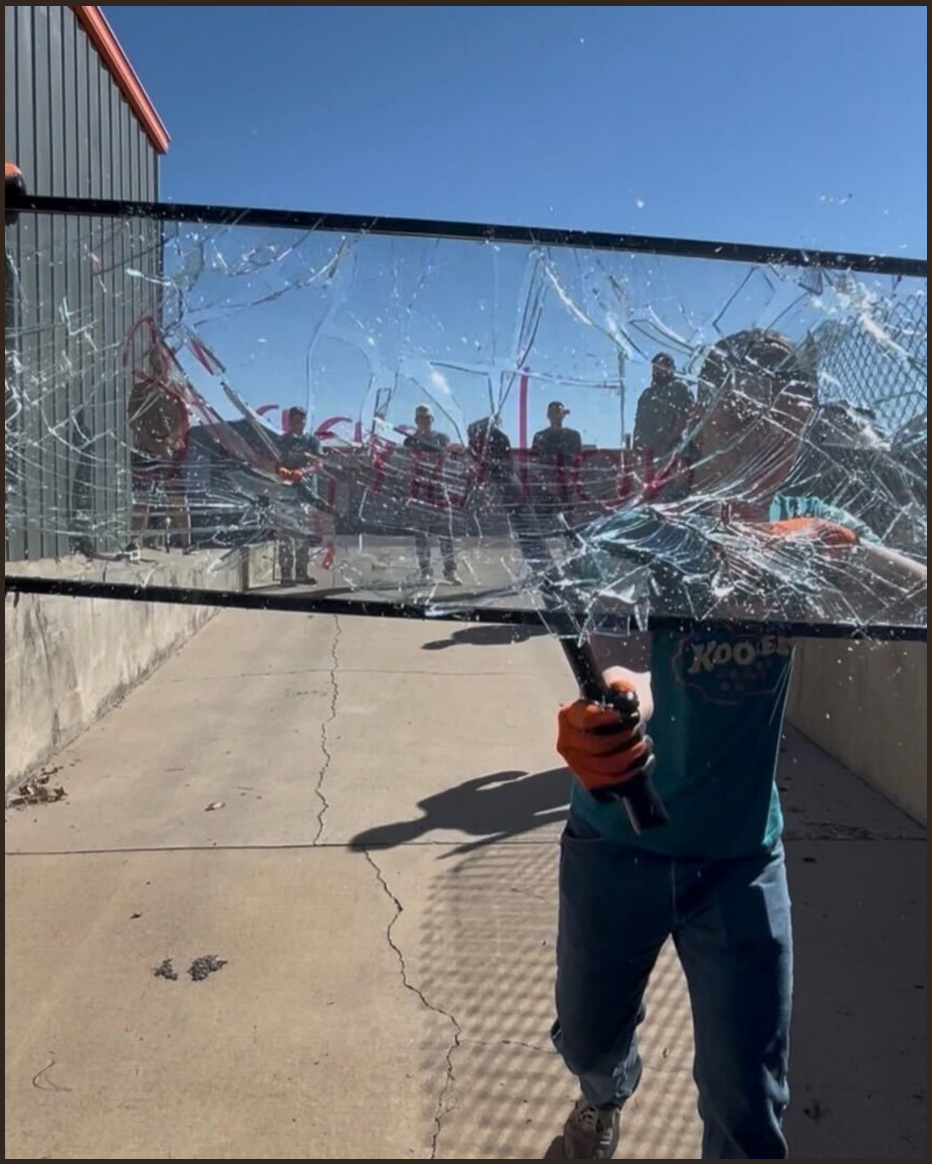
*We got you.*

— Matt Kuehlhorn

# THE KRAFTSMEN

*Each one broke the glass.*
*Each one carries the hammer.*

PASCUAL



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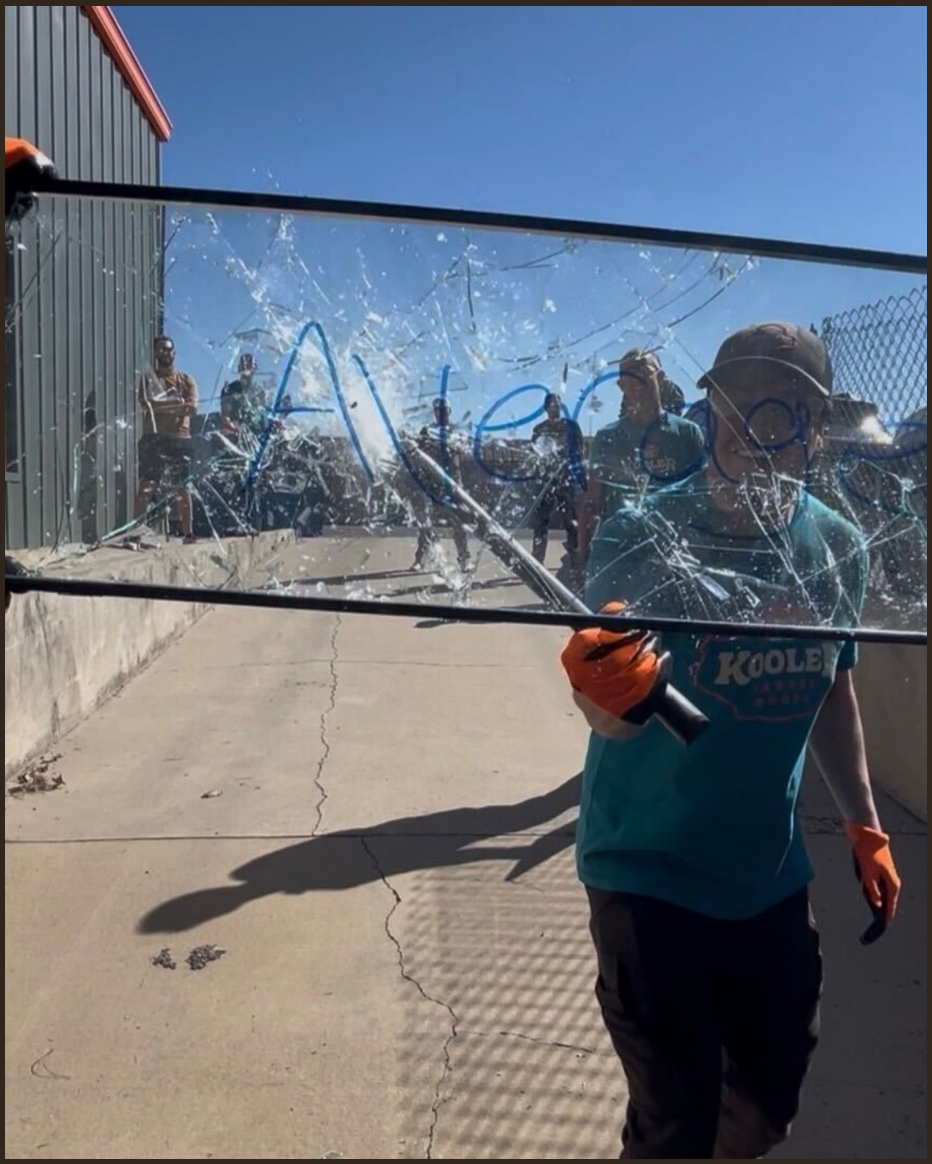

CESAR

CODY

DILLON

EVAN

JASON

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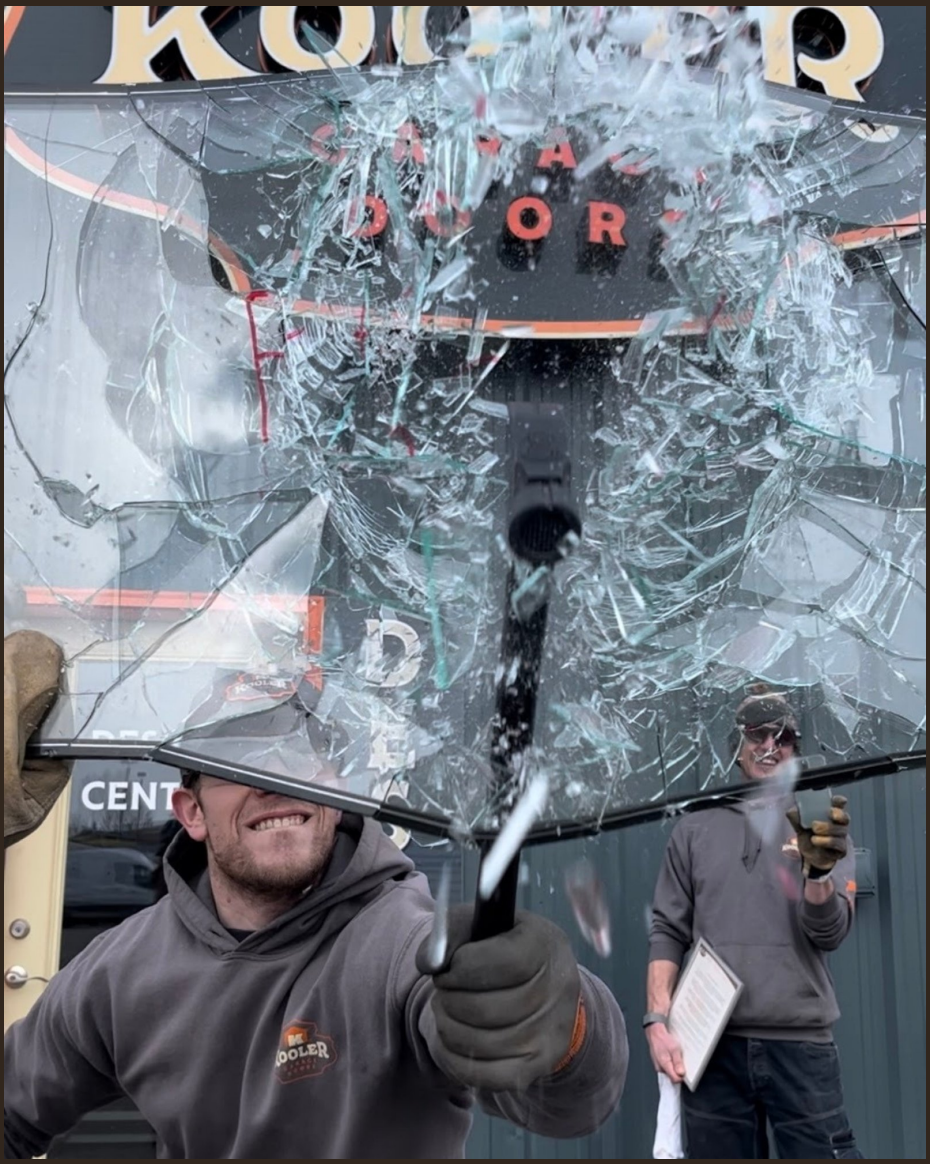


TEDDY


## THE CREDO. THE HAMMER. THE BAR.

*We got you.*

# Kraftsmanship.

*It's Kooler with a K.*

Something is missing from the trades.

You have felt it. The call that does not come back. The bid that does not match the invoice. The standard that quietly slipped over the past twenty years.

This is the story of a company that refused to let it stay missing — and the people who carry the standard into every driveway they pull into.

*Not perfect. Accountable. Always.*

**KOOLER**

GARAGE DOORS

*We got you.*

KoolerGarageDoors.com