1 The Fall

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I could feel the anxiety and sense of hopelessness start to overcome me. Like every night at this time, driving home from a long day of work, I dialed my phone and waited for the bank's automated system to tell me what our company's checking account balance was.

With heart racing, the response was not surprising.

Overdrawn.

Why was I even checking at this point? Our company bank account had been overdrawn for the past two weeks.

For some reason, though, I still dialed that stupid number and held out a faint hope that we were in a better situation than what reality demonstrated.

After hanging up the phone and feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders, I started to cry.

I was 31 years old. My business was a failure. My family life was suffering. And for a guy who sees himself as a problem-solver, I was out of answers.

So the tears kept flowing.

I knew that, when I arrived home in a few minutes, my wife, Nikki, would likely not even ask me the standard question, "So how was work today?"

You see, some questions in life are better off not being asked. My wife understood that. She'd gotten used to seeing the strain in my eyes and the worry in my countenance. The pain was self-evident.

Such was the life of a pool guy in January 2009…

How I Became a "Pool Guy"

Upon graduating from West Virginia University in 2001, my plan was simple: get an interview and get a job.

By this point in my life, I was already married and had my first child, Danielle (eventually, we'd have four children).

Initially, my plan worked out. I identified a company that I thought would be a great fit, got an interview, and was offered the job immediately. Nikki and I loaded our daughter in the car seat, along with the few belongings we owned in a U-Haul, and headed off to live near Washington, D.C., as I would work in the northern Virginia town of Vienna.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long for me to realize I wasn't thrilled about my new job. To make matters worse, my wife hated Washington, D.C., traffic. So before we entrenched ourselves too deeply, we left the area and headed back to the area where we grew up—the "Northern Neck" of Virginia—in order to regroup and figure out what our next step would be.

It was during this time that two of my good friends, Jim Spiess and Jason Hughes, had just started a swimming pool company—River Pools and Spas—and were in the process of opening a small retail store (selling hot tubs, swimming pool supplies, and so on) in the quaint town of Warsaw, Virginia.

Knowing they needed someone to run the retail location while they installed above-ground and in-ground swimming pools for customers, Jim and Jason asked me if I'd consider managing the store.

My response should give you a good feel for where my mind was at the time: "Sure, I'm happy to help you guys get going until I find out where I'll be working next."

It's a statement that makes me chuckle to this day.

You see, no one ever says, "I want to be a pool guy when I grow up."

I certainly never saw myself with this title when I was younger, or when I graduated from college. But life is a funny thing.

As soon as I started at River Pools, I quickly realized I didn't know much about the industry. Simply "knowing how to swim" wasn't going to help me sell hot tubs, pool chemicals, and the like.

So I did what I always do—I learned. I read. I studied. I dug deep into the industry. I didn't know how long I was going to be a pool guy, but I did know I didn't want to look dumb in front of customers.

Before long, I started to know a lot about pools and spas. In fact, when Jim and Jason would come into the store, I would quiz them on hot tub brands, distinguishing features, key components, and other subjects. It didn't take them long to realize I suddenly knew a lot about the stuff we sold. Customers, too, could see that, if they had a question, I generally had an answer. And if I didn't have it, it would bother me so much that I'd assuredly study it so as to better respond on the next occasion.

It was for this reason that Jim and Jason believed I would be the ideal third partner in the business, asking me at the six-month mark whether I would join their team for good.

Having no idea the impact this invitation would have on my life, I simply responded, "Yes."

That was the year 2001.

2001 to 2008: The False Economy

Growing a business is never an easy thing to do. It doesn't matter the field, or the industry, or the area—it isn't easy.

Nor was it easy in the early years of River Pools and Spas.

There were victories, and there were defeats.

There were many good days and many bad ones as well.

But one thing is for sure—the economy of the United States during these years (specifically, the housing market) made it so anyone in the home improvement industry could grow a business and make a decent living, even if they weren't particularly good at what they did.

For River Pools and Spas, the strong economy meant that home values were bloating to ridiculous levels, which therefore enabled almost anyone (if you had a heartbeat, you qualified) to get a second mortgage or a home equity line.

In other words, for the first seven and a half years of the 2000s, anyone could get a loan for a swimming pool.

If you (the pool guy) could sell it, they (the homeowners) would find someone to give them the money for it.

Looking back, it doesn't speak too highly of our country's economic system, but it was what it was. And everyone was a part of it, present party included.

2008: The Wheels Start to Fall Off

The year 2008 started off with so much promise. Our company had been through more than our share of ups and downs, and I was invigorated with the prospect of having a banner year.

Finally, it looked like we were going to turn the corner and generate sufficient revenue to go into the offseason with enough savings in the bank. (In Virginia, the main sales season for swimming pool companies is March to September.)

By mid-summer of that year, sales were higher than they'd ever been. I can remember looking at the calendar thinking, "Wow, we have two months' worth of pools sold that need to be installed—this is amazing!"

But then, like a sudden earthquake that no one is prepared for, in September of that year, our country's economic system collapsed.

Lehman Brothers went belly up.

The Dow crashed.

John McCain and Barack Obama were on the campaign trail debating what should be done with the failing banks.

It was a chain reaction that seemed to grow worse and worse every day.

In fact, within 48 hours of the Dow's crash, we at River Pools and Spas had five customers who had put down deposits to have a pool installed during the winter months essentially tell us, "We're too worried about the economy and cannot move forward with our swimming pool project."

With the average pool installation cost being in the $50,000 range, this equated to roughly $250,000 in losses, all within 48 hours.

To say it was a huge blow would be an understatement.

Over the coming months, things went from bad to worse. Our savings, and then our credit, were completely depleted.

By December 2008, we had to tell our employees to stay at home because there was no work to be done.

By January 2009, our business checking account was overdrawn.

Things got so bad that my business partners and I met with multiple business consultants, only to be told, for all intents and purposes, that it was the end of the road for River Pools and Spas

It was time to file bankruptcy.

This pill was a difficult one to swallow. We had given that little swimming pool company everything we had over the previous eight years, and now we were going to not only lose it, but also our homes, our credit, and our foreseeable financial future.

And so there I was, crying in my car that late night in January 2009—account overdrawn, employees sitting at home, and staring bankruptcy square in the face.

No doubt, it was a dark and difficult time in my life.