

PROTECTED BY ALFIE INC.

The First One Up

The Story of ALFIE and the Woman Who Dreamed Him Into Existence

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Protected by ALFIE Inc.

For Ayaz

Without whom, my dream would still be a dream.

"It doesn't matter where you started or where you are.

*The first one to stand back up and keep going
is the one most likely to make it."*

Donna Rougeau

A Note Before We Begin

This is a true story.

The events in it happened. The pain was real. The dream was real. And ALFIE, the platform at the centre of it all, is real, live, and deployed as of the first day of summer, 2026.

It has been written in the style of a fable because the truest things often arrive that way, not as arguments or evidence, but as stories you feel before you understand.

At its heart, this is a story about getting up. About a woman who learned to do that before most children learn to tie their shoes, and who has been doing it ever since. But it is also a story about something else. Something that takes longer to see.

It is a story about gratitude. Not the kind that hopes to be given more. The kind that holds you up. The kind you stand on when there is nothing else beneath you, because someone, somewhere, once gave you enough to get back up on.

You do not build something real alone. Not truly. You may begin alone, and the beginning may feel very alone indeed. But if what you are building is true, if it comes from the right place and points toward something the world actually needs, then something quietly remarkable begins to happen. The right people start to find you. Not all at once. Not with fanfare. One by one, in the manner and at the moment you need them most.

It takes a village. And when the timing is right, they appear.

This is the story of a tribe that formed around a true thing.

There is Ayaz, who crossed twelve time zones for no pay because he believed before there was any reason to. There is Ami, brave and brilliant, who invested herself to ensure Donna kept going in every way she could. There is Clint, the loyal mentor whose steady faith never wavered. There is Johane, who held Donna's vision when Donna could not hold it herself, and then went out and found the first client. There is Heather, who has been her friend since they were eight years old and who showed up with food when the money ran

out, because that is how the island says it cares. And there is Tracey, who has spent her life connecting and encouraging the women of this island, and who, in the leanest week of all, loaned Donna the money for groceries, because she believed in her friend more than she understood the thing her friend was building.

Each of them arrived exactly when they were needed. None of them were accidents.

But before any of them, there were two who came first and stayed longest. There was Eva, her great aunt, who chose a hurting ten-year-old girl and gave her the first proof she was ever offered that she was loved and lovable. And there is Lee, her son, the child she raised who grew into the man who gave her the care of a man in the hardest year of her life.

There is also Koray Gubor, whose rigorous work on topical authority shaped the intellectual foundations of ALFIE. And Dixon Jones, founder of InLinks and WaiKay, What AI Knows About You, whose work on strings to things helped Donna understand what she was really building and why it mattered.

This book exists because of all of them. And it exists because of a woman who refused, one more time, to stay down.

Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island Summer 2026

Chapter One: The Island

There is a place in the North Atlantic where the soil is the colour of rust and the winters arrive without apology.

Prince Edward Island. The smallest province in Canada. A crescent of land in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, separated from the mainland by water that freezes hard enough in winter to walk across, if you are willing to trust it.

Donna was born there.

She left when she was eleven years old.

Not because someone took her somewhere. Not because her family moved. She left because staying had become something she could not do. She had grown up in a home where hurt was not an event. It was the atmosphere. The weather. The thing you woke up inside every morning and had to navigate before you could do anything else.

* * *

But a year before she left, when she was ten years old, something happened that she would carry for the rest of her life.

Her great aunt Eva chose her.

That is the only word for what it was. Not a visit that happened to include her. A choosing. Eva took her to stay a spell, just the two of them, in the old house in St. Peters Bay, a historic place with a turret that stood across the road from the water.

There was hot chocolate. There was a nighty, white and new, bought for her, hers. And in the evening Eva took her by the hand and they crossed the road together and sat down on the train tracks to watch the sun go down over the bay.

Eva put her arm around her. She told her to remember this. To remember this moment, right here. She told her she was loved. That she was always loved, and lovable, and that this would be true no matter what.

And the thing that happened, the thing that would matter for the next fifty years, was not that Eva said it.

It was that Donna believed her.

She was a child who had learned that hurt was the weather, who woke up inside it every morning and navigated it before she could do anything else. A child like that has every reason in the world to let a kind word pass through her and keep going. But this one she kept. She sat on the tracks in the last of the light with her great aunt's arm around her and she believed, all the way down, that she was loved and lovable.

That night she slept the way she had never slept before.

She did not have words yet for what Eva had given her. She would spend a long time finding them. But it was the first thing anyone had ever planted in her that was not survival. It was the first gratitude. And she would carry it, unspoken and unspent, through everything that came next.

* * *

The house in St. Peters Bay was family. Eva had married into it. Her husband was the son of Dr. Roderick MacDonald, Dr. Roddie to everyone on that part of the island, who practiced medicine in St. Peters Bay for sixty-nine years, much of it from the front room of that same house. The island still tells stories about him leaving his horse in the road during a blizzard and going over the snowbanks on foot, because someone on the other side needed a doctor and the weather was not a good enough reason to stay home. He is said to have helped bring four thousand babies into the world. He got up, through every winter the Gulf could make, for sixty-nine years.

Donna was too young to understand any of that at the time. She only knew the turret, and the water across the road, and her great aunt's arm around her. But she came to see it later. The first place she was ever shown that kind of love was a house where getting up to care for people was simply what the family did. Eva had married into a line of it. And for one week, she folded a hurting ten-year-old girl into that family and let her feel what it was to be cared for by people who knew how.

Some things you are given before you are old enough to know you have been given them.

* * *

A year later, at eleven, she left.

She made a calculation that most adults never have to make. She decided that surviving on her own was safer than surviving at home.

She went to Halifax. She lied about her age. She got a job in a hotel laundry room and rented a room in a boarding house and she got up every morning and went to work and paid her own rent and did not go back.

She was eleven years old. She was the first one up.

This detail matters. Not because it is dramatic, though it is, but because everything that follows in this story flows from it. Every time Donna was told her ideas were too complicated. Every time she was managed and silenced and positioned as the problem. Every time she was let go, passed over, dismissed, or underestimated. She had already survived something harder than all of it combined before she turned twelve.

She knew how to get up. She had been doing it since before most children learn to do their own laundry. And underneath the getting up, quiet and unspent, was a week on the train tracks when someone had told her she was lovable and she had believed it. The engine and the fuel. She left home with both.

And to anyone who has ever been taught to believe they are not enough, yet somehow too much, this is for you too. Come back to who you truly are. Because that is not true. You are exactly what you were meant to be, and need to be, for your purpose in this life. Get up and be you. We need that. The world needs that. You need that.

* * *

In 1979, Donna made her way to British Columbia.

She got back into school. High school. She lied about her age again, jumping straight from Grade 7 into Grade 11, because that is what you do when you have been surviving on your own for years and have no patience for starting at the beginning. She adapted. She always adapted.

It was at that school that she got to participate in one of the first pilot computer lab programmes in the region. She sat down in front of those

machines and something happened that had not happened often enough in her life up to that point.

The machines did not hurt her feelings.

They did not have politics or favourites or a need to manage her voice. They responded to exactly what she gave them, precisely and without vagueness. Her island mannerisms did not leave her, nor did they always fit the local culture she found herself in. But in that lab, none of that mattered. The machines did not care where she was from or how she spoke or what she had survived to get there. They simply waited for her input and responded with complete honesty.

She was hooked.

Soon after, she began learning to program in assembler, and discovered something that would stay with her for the rest of her career. Communicating with machines was clean. There was no ambiguity, no politics, no hidden agenda. You said what you meant and the machine heard exactly that. It was, in its own way, a relief she had not known she was looking for.

She would begin to build her career there, and a life, and an expertise that would eventually become something the world needed.

* * *

Between the fall of 2012 and 2017, Donna lived in Mumbai.

She had gone there to build digital agencies for North American clients, to take what she knew about how the digital world worked and apply it in a place where everything was different and nothing was simple. India is, she will tell anyone who asks, the land of contradictions. Ancient and modern, chaotic and precise, overwhelming and generous in equal measure.

The work was demanding. The city never slept. The distances between where things were and where they needed to be, technically, culturally, structurally, were vast. She closed them, one by one, with the same stubborn patience she had been practising since she was eleven years old.

But it was not the work that changed her most. It was the people.

In India, when you teach someone, when you coach them, when you give them an opportunity they could not have found on their own, the ripple does not stop with that person. It moves through their family. Their parents. Their siblings. The people who depend on them. The appreciation for what you offer is multiplied by every life your work touches. Your responsibility, she came to understand, is not just to the person sitting in front of you. It is to everyone that person carries.

She brought that understanding home with her. It changed how she led. It changed who she hired and how she protected them. You can see it in how she later took Ami under her wing and quietly worked to amplify a voice the room was trying to suppress. You can see it in how she would one day treat Ayaz, a young man in Pakistan whose talent she recognised and whose future she chose to invest in before there was any certainty of return.

Mumbai taught her that. Or perhaps Mumbai only reminded her of something a great aunt had shown her on a set of train tracks a long time before: that care, once given, does not stop with the person who receives it. It moves outward. It always moves outward.

* * *

And years later, when a job offer came that required moving back to Prince Edward Island, back to the rust-coloured soil and the hard winters and the place she had left at eleven, she said yes. She packed up her life on the West Coast and she came home after nearly forty-five years away.

The island looked the same. She was not the same.

The job she came back for was not the worst she ever had. That distinction belonged to the one that came after.

But the island brought her home. And home, it turned out, was exactly where she needed to be.

* * *

She came back to a place she had left as a child and barely knew as an adult. It could have been a lonely return. For a while it was.

Then she met Tracey.

Tracey has spent her life connecting and encouraging women. She founded a group called Island Women Connect, and she runs it, and through it she has made it her work to see that women on the island find each other and do not have to stand alone. When Donna arrived, Tracey did what Tracey does. She introduced her around. She folded her in. She made sure that the woman who had just come home to a place she left at eleven would not have to be lonely in it.

It is simply who Tracey is. She cares for everyone. Donna was one of many, and there was nothing diminished in that. It only meant the care was real, and constant, and not reserved for the moments it would be noticed.

Donna did not know it yet, but the friend who made sure she was not lonely when she arrived would also be the friend who made sure she could eat when everything was on the line.

Chapter Two: The Dream

Donna wakes at 3:47 in the morning.

She doesn't reach for her phone. She doesn't move at all for a moment. She just lies there in the dark of her Charlottetown apartment, feeling the particular stillness of a mind that has just received something it has been working toward for a very long time.

She knows, without being able to explain how she knows, that the thing she has been building in her head for three years, through two jobs that broke her, through months of rejection letters from companies who loved her experience right up until they didn't, through a dismissal so casual it still makes her chest tighten to remember it, that thing has just become real.

She has a name for it.

ALFIE.

The name came with the clarity. She knew immediately where it came from. Her father's name was Alfred. Alfred Joseph Steele. He was not a good man, and he was not a good father, and he did the best he could with what he had. What he gave her was not what a father is supposed to give. But what he gave her, without meaning to, was the one thing that made everything else possible. She learned to stand back up. She owed him that.

She doesn't know yet what the letters will eventually stand for. That will come later, in the daylight, with coffee and the particular satisfaction of working backwards from a thing that already exists to the words that describe it. What she knows right now, at 3:47 in the morning in the quiet of Atlantic Canada, is that she has been shown something. Not invented it. Shown it.

She gets up.

* * *

This is not a story about artificial intelligence, although artificial intelligence is in it.

It is not a story about search engines or knowledge graphs or cryptographic verification, although all of those things are in it too.

It is a story about what happens when a person who has been told, repeatedly and in various ways, that their ideas are too complicated, too much work, too difficult to explain, when that person finally stops trying to convince anyone and simply builds the thing they know needs to exist.

It is a story about getting up.

Donna has been getting up since she was eleven years old.

She is very good at it by now.

Chapter Three: What She Saw That Nobody Else Was Looking For

The year is 2022 and Donna is sitting at her computer at a company that sells something she is not allowed to talk about in polite company, reading a document that Google has just published about how it evaluates the quality of content on the web.

Experience. Expertise. Authoritativeness. Trustworthiness.

Four words arranged into an acronym that most of the people around her will spend the next two years misunderstanding. They will treat it as a content checklist. Write more authoritative content, they will say. Show more expertise. Add author bios.

Donna reads the document the way she has always read things, looking for what isn't being said. Google gives general guidance. They always have. The specifics live somewhere else. They live in the patents.

She thinks of Bill Slawski from SEO by the Sea.

Bill was not famous in the way that marketing celebrities are famous. He was famous in the way that certain researchers are famous, quietly, among people who understand what they are looking at. He had spent years reading Google's patent filings and writing about what he found there, translating technical truth into language the industry could use. He had died earlier that year and the loss of him had felt, to Donna, like losing a library. She had been following his work for years, bookmarking things she didn't fully understand yet, knowing she would understand them eventually.

Now she pulls those bookmarks open alongside the Google document, and the shape of something begins to emerge.

The document talks about E-E-A-T as a quality signal. The patents talk about entity relationships, about semantic structures, about how systems understand not just what a page says but what a thing is, its connections to other verified things, its position in a graph of knowledge, its provenance.

This is not about content. This is about identity.

A business doesn't just need to publish authoritative content. It needs to be understood as an authoritative entity by the systems that are increasingly deciding what gets surfaced and what gets buried. The way to be understood is not to write more blog posts. It is to structure your identity, every node of it, every relationship, every verifiable fact about what you are, in a way that those systems can read, trust, and act on.

She starts writing things down. Semantic triples. Information gain. The Atomic Sandwich. GraphRAG. Technical SEO not as a checklist but as a structural discipline with profound consequences for how machines understand a business.

She thinks of Dixon Jones.

Dixon is the founder of InLinks and WaiKay, What AI Knows About You. He is not a vendor. He is a teacher to an entire industry. He had been talking for years about the shift from strings to things, the idea that search systems were moving away from matching keywords to understanding entities, the actual things that words refer to and the relationships between them. It is, Donna recognises immediately, exactly what the patents are describing. The same truth, seen from a different angle.

Dixon had come into her world before she moved back East. But when she saw the depth of the challenges at the Affiliate Marketing Company, she called on him again. She brought him in. Both times the rooms would not implement. The resistance was not to Dixon's ideas. The resistance was to the amount of work the ideas required, and to the loss of control that understanding them would have demanded of people who preferred not to understand.

She takes note of this pattern. It will matter later.

There is one person in her world who does not respond with fear when she explains what she sees. Clint. He has been a mentor to Donna for years, steady and loyal in the particular way of someone who has decided, without fanfare, that she is worth backing. He believes she has something real, and he says so. He backs her up in the ways he can, speaking when others go quiet, holding the line when the room tries to make her smaller.

She brings these ideas to the executives. The room goes quiet in the particular way that rooms go quiet when the person speaking knows more than the people listening and the people listening know it and don't like how that feels.

"Too much work," someone says. "Too complicated." "What does this have to do with revenue this quarter?"

She goes back to her computer and starts building tools. Automating the analysis. Making the output visible without requiring anyone to understand the process. She is trying to build a bridge between what she knows and what they can hear.

She doesn't know yet that the bridge was never going to be built inside someone else's company. But she is starting to understand it.

* * *

There is someone else at this company who matters to this story.

Her name is Ami. Donna hired her, her first real corporate job in Canada after immigrating from overseas. Ami is brilliant. She is also brave in a way that does not announce itself loudly. She moved her life across the globe, took risks that most people never would, all in pursuit of something better. And yet in this company, her brilliance and her bravery go largely unacknowledged. She gets stepped over. Her ideas surface in other people's mouths a few minutes after she has said them, without attribution.

Donna notices. She has spent thirty years watching this happen to people like Ami. She has spent thirty years having it happen to herself.

She takes Ami quietly under her wing. Teaches her to hold her ground in a room. Helps her find the language to make her voice carry. Does it carefully, out of the sight lines of people who would see it as a threat, with Clint noticing and saying nothing and understanding exactly what is happening and why.

She will not be there to protect Ami forever. She knows this. She doesn't know yet how the story ends.

* * *

Eventually, she is offered something that sounds like what she has been looking for. The title is Director of Global SEO. The promise is execution. The chance to finally build what she knows needs to be built, at a scale that matches the vision.

She says yes. She leaves the Affiliate Marketing Company. She is ready.

Chapter Four: The Room She Walked Into

“You’ll get to execute here,” they say. “We want someone who thinks the way you think. We’ve been waiting for someone like you.”

She hears these words and she wants to believe them badly enough that she does. This is not stupidity. This is hope. And hope, after a long period of not being heard, is a powerful and occasionally dangerous thing.

Everything happens over video. She works from home, as she has for years. The meetings are on Teams or Google Meet. The faces on her screen are warm and enthusiastic in the particular way of people who have decided what they need before they’ve fully understood what they’re getting.

One of the first things she does is hire Ayaz. She meets him, recognises immediately how his mind works, the precision of it, the way he sees structure where others see noise, and brings him in. He is, from the beginning, the clearest thinker in the room.

It will not be enough.

The CMO doesn’t want to own SEO. He wants an agency to own the accountability while he owns the relationship. He is, Donna will eventually conclude, the most sophisticated accountability avoider she has ever encountered in a career full of them. Every problem that reaches him gets redirected. Every insight that threatens his narrative gets quietly buried. His KPIs become her KPIs. His blind spots become her blind spots, except she can see them and he cannot, which makes her dangerous to him in a way she doesn’t fully understand until it is too late.

The problems are everywhere and profound. Contact pages removed and replaced with a chat function that works intermittently. Ten thousand products pulled from search overnight without notice. A loyalty programme that blocks the checkout path. Multiple sites carrying identical products with identical pricing and identical images. The COO on record, in a meeting she was present for, saying that ecommerce doesn’t matter, action it last.

She watches all of it with the particular distress of someone who can see exactly what is happening and is not permitted to say so clearly enough, or loudly enough, or to the right people.

She tries to speak. The CMO tells her what she can say and what she cannot. She tries to document. The documentation gets used against her. She tries to be patient. The patience gets mistaken for agreement.

And then, gradually and then suddenly, she finds herself positioned as the reason the numbers aren't moving. The narrative has been written by someone who had been working on it longer than she understood. Her voice has been so thoroughly managed that when the moment comes, there is no record of her having said the things she said.

She is let go on a video call.

The faces on the screen are carefully neutral. The words are the standard words. She closes the laptop when it is done and sits for a long moment in the quiet of her Charlottetown apartment.

Back on PEI. Back where she started. Let go again.

She sits in the quiet for a long time.

Outside, the last of the summer is ending. The light on the island in late summer has a quality she has not forgotten in forty-five years away. Warm and long and golden in a way that feels like it is trying to say something before it goes.

Ayaz stays at first. But without Donna there to absorb what the environment throws at people, the weight of it becomes something different. There is no shield. He sees everything clearly and there is no one left who will say so out loud alongside him.

She didn't know it yet. But in the months to come, a message from him would be the beginning of everything.

Chapter Five: The Months That Had to Happen

The Fall

She gives herself time. Not to feel sorry for herself. To recover. There is a difference, and she has learned it the hard way over the course of a life that required more recovery than most.

She grew up in a home where getting hurt was not exceptional. It was the weather. And the lesson she learned, not from being taught it but from surviving it, was not to stay down. Not to stay where you keep getting hurt. To get up when you get knocked down.

She has been getting up since she was eleven. By now it is simply what she does.

The fall settles around Charlottetown the way it always has. The leaves turn the colours of the soil, rust and amber and deep red, and the air sharpens and the days shorten and the island turns inward the way islands do when summer leaves. There is something honest about an Atlantic Canadian fall. It does not pretend to be anything other than what it is: the beginning of the hard part.

She begins to apply for jobs. She is good at interviews. She has always been good at interviews. Careful and clear and genuinely interested in the problems in the room. She gets called back. She goes through rounds of technical testing on video. Culture fit assessments. Careful, considered conversations with people who say they understand what she brings.

They tell her they love her experience. They are excited to learn from her. They will be in touch.

The Winter

The emails arrive without exception.

“We have chosen to go with someone who better meets our requirements at this time.”

Every single one of them.

She does not break. But she bends.

Winter on the island is a particular kind of quiet. The tourists are long gone. The roads that were busy in summer are empty. The Gulf freezes and the wind comes off it with a directness that the island never apologises for. You learn, growing up here, that the cold is simply a condition of being alive in this place. You dress for it. You move through it. You do not ask it to be something else.

She moves through the winter the same way. Application after application. Round after round. Long processes that go deep and then go quiet. She prepares thoroughly, speaks clearly, answers every question with the full weight of what she knows. And then she waits. And the silence comes, and then the letter, and then she begins again.

She is sixty years old. She has thirty years of expertise that most people in her field have spent their careers trying to accumulate. She knows things that are about to become enormously valuable and she cannot find a room that will let her use them.

On the worst of those nights, when the latest letter had done its quiet work and the apartment was dark and the wind was coming off the ice with nothing in its way, she did not reach for willpower. Willpower was running thin and she was honest enough with herself to know it. She reached instead for something older.

She was ten years old again, on the train tracks in St. Peters Bay, Eva's arm around her, the sun going down over the bay. You are loved. You are always loved, and lovable. She had believed it then, all the way down. And some part of her, sixty years old on the floor of an island winter, believed it still.

That was the thing that got her up. Not a certainty that the next application would land. Not a plan. The memory of having once been cared for, completely, by someone who chose her. It had been the first thing anyone ever gave her that was not survival, and half a century later it was still holding weight.

This is the thing about gratitude that the people who sell it as a feeling never quite say. It is not something you reach for because it is pleasant. It is something you stand on when there is nothing else underneath you.

Willpower starts the engine. Gratitude is the fuel that keeps it running after the willpower is gone.

She bends, and holds, and keeps going.

The Spring

There is one final interview.

The founder and CEO of an automated SEO platform, successful, celebrated, backed by serious money, building something that hundreds of companies are paying for. He wants a team lead who can vibe code. He'd be happy to talk again if she went away and learned how to do that.

She closes the laptop.

And she seethes.

Not at him, exactly. At what he represents. The celebrated platform with the gaping holes. The confident founder who doesn't know what he doesn't know. The hundreds of clients who are going to pay for something that sounds like the solution and isn't quite. Real businesses. Real pain. Real humans watching their numbers fall and trusting that the help they have been sold is going to work.

She has seen this before. She has seen it repeatedly. And the people who sold the snake oil always walked away with millions, entirely detached from the hurt it caused.

I know how to actually solve this. That's it. I will build my own.

She goes home. She is already home, at her computer in her Charlottetown apartment, on the island she left at eleven and came back to fifty years later. Outside, the first green is pushing up through the island soil, that rust-red earth that has been here longer than anyone can remember, and the light is coming back, and the days are lengthening, and the island is waking up.

That night, she sleeps.

And in the sleep, in the particular depth of rest that arrives after a decision has been made that the waking mind hasn't quite caught up to yet, something

comes to her. A name. A shape. A clarity so complete that when she wakes at 3:47 in the morning she doesn't feel groggy or confused.

She gets up.

Chapter Six: The Building

She makes coffee.

She sits down at her computer and opens a new document. At the top of it she types a single word: ALFIE.

Then she gets a Pro Gemini account. She uploads everything, the patents, the pseudo-code, the years of notes, the half-built logic of tools that never got to be finished. The E-E-A-T research, the Atomic Sandwich, the GraphRAG architecture, the information gain frameworks, the semantic triple structures. All of it. Years of accumulated understanding poured into a single conversation with a machine that would not be afraid of it.

She starts to explain. Not to a human who will get defensive or distracted or political. To a machine that will simply try to help her build what she describes.

It is harder than she expects. The machine takes shortcuts. It drops pieces when it gets confused. It moves too fast and she has to slow it down, re-harden its behaviour, check everything it produces against what she knows to be true. Thirty years of knowing exactly what she is looking at, applied now to ensuring that what gets built matches exactly what she dreamed.

She thinks, at one point, of the CEO who dismissed her for not knowing how to vibe code.

She is vibe coding. She laughs alone in her apartment in the early hours of the morning and keeps going.

* * *

Through these months, there is Lee.

He is her son, and he lives at home with her. The child she raised, grown now, sharing the same walls while she builds the thing that is trying to consume her. This is the year he gives the care of a man. While she builds, he tends. Not loudly. Not with speeches about believing in her, though he does. He tends the way you tend something you love and will not watch go under. There is food in the house because he sees to it. She eats because he is there. When she has been at the screen so long the day has lost track of itself, a glass

of water appears beside the keyboard without a word, and she drinks it, and she keeps going.

The work wants all of her. That is the nature of this kind of work. It does not ask and it does not leave room. There are stretches where Donna forgets she is a person and becomes only the thing she is making, and in those stretches it is Lee, a few steps away in the same home, who holds the line between the two. He keeps her fed. He keeps her watered. He keeps her, in the old sense of the word. The girl who taught herself to get up at eleven because no one was coming to catch her is, fifty years on, living under one roof with the child she raised, and being quietly caught by him.

She does not say much about it to him at the time. There is no language ready for it yet. But she notices every glass of water. She notices all of it. And on the days when the savings line is closest and the doubt is loudest, the fact of him in the house, making sure she is still alive inside the work, is one of the things that keeps her standing.

* * *

In the early spring, Ami reaches out.

Ami, who is brave and brilliant in equal measure. Who moved her life across the globe and built something better with her own hands. Ami had been there from the very beginning of the ALFIE idea, encouraging Donna to build it, believing in it before there was anything to believe in. She had invested herself to ensure Donna kept going, in every way she could, from concept to what it was becoming. She was not someone who arrived after. She was someone who had been there all along.

Now she reaches out again. She has been watching. She wants to be part of what comes next.

They start a podcast together. Reimagining Digital. Two women who were both silenced in the same environment, now sitting across from each other with microphones in front of them, talking publicly about the things they couldn't say in those rooms. Available on Spotify, iHeart Radio, and YouTube. For anyone who needs to hear it.

Ami is proof that the thing Donna was trying to do, make space for a voice the room was trying to suppress, worked. Her voice found its way. And now it reaches people neither of them will ever meet, in rooms they will never be in, saying the things someone somewhere needs to hear.

* * *

Not long after, in those same early spring weeks, her phone lights up.

It is from Ayaz. His wee hours in Pakistan. Her morning in Charlottetown.

“Hi Donna. I gave my notice. It’s too too stressful.”

She sits with that for a moment.

She knows what has been happening to him since she left. She had been the thing that stood between him and the full force of that environment, and without her there, it has become too much.

She types back. She tells him what she is building. What ALFIE is. What it is going to do. She tells him she needs someone who can take her vibe code and make it clean. Make it real.

She tells him she can’t pay him yet.

His reply comes quickly, from the other side of the world.

“I’ll do it anyway.”

Ayaz is her number one hire. He is also, she will say for the rest of her life, a blessing. He brings to the build not just technical precision but a deep understanding of how information structures work, how entities relate to each other, how knowledge flows through the systems that are increasingly mediating between businesses and the people trying to find them. Where Donna’s code captures the logic, Ayaz makes it clean, rigorous, and real.

They build ALFIE together across twelve time zones. Donna in Charlottetown at her computer. Ayaz in Pakistan at whatever hour the work requires. Both of them watching their savings narrow toward a line that neither of them speaks out loud. Both of them keeping going anyway.

The end of the savings was visible. They kept going.

* * *

Heather shows up with food.

More than once. In the weeks before launch, when the hours are longest and the apartment has stopped keeping regular time, Heather, Donna's friend since they were eight years old, who knew Donna before she left the island and after she came back and through everything in between, arrives with the particular abundance of someone raised where love and food are the same language.

She doesn't ask how it's going. She doesn't offer advice. She brings food, and she stays for a while, and she leaves, and somehow after she goes the apartment feels less like a place where someone is building alone and more like a place where something is being built together.

It is, Donna thinks, exactly enough.

* * *

That same week, in the final sprint, Tracey shows up again.

Donna is down to her last pennies. Tracey knows it. And Tracey does the thing most friendships never do and never will. She loans Donna money, so there will be groceries, so Donna can eat while she finishes building the thing.

It is easy to underestimate what that is. It is not a casserole left on a step. It is a person reaching into her own pocket, in the lean and uncertain stretch before anything has been proven, and deciding her friend is worth the risk of not being paid back. Food is love on this island, but money is something else again. Money is the thing most friendships will not touch, because it can break them. Tracey touches it anyway.

She could not tell you what ALFIE is. She has no way to evaluate the thing she is putting her money behind. She is not backing a technology. She is backing Donna, the way she has backed her since the day she folded her into the island and made sure she was not alone. She looks at her friend in her thinnest hour and chooses, with the one currency that costs something to give, to make sure she is cared for.

That is what Donna remembers. Not the talk, though Tracey talks too, proud as anything, to anyone who will listen, about the amazing thing her friend has built. The loan. A woman who cares for everyone, caring for her, exactly when it counts.

* * *

Somewhere in those same last weeks, Donna gets on a video call with Johane.

Johane is not a business contact. She is a kindred spirit, one of those rare people who can hold a clear picture of who you are even on the days you have lost it yourself. Through the building, when Donna's own sense of the thing wavered, when the savings line and the silence and the sheer length of it began to blur her certainty, it was Johane who held the vision steady and handed it back to her, larger than Donna could hold alone. She had a way of reminding Donna of what Donna already knew. Not cheerleading. Something steadier than that. She simply refused to misplace the truth of who Donna was, and she returned it to her, again and again, until Donna could pick it back up herself.

Johane has known Donna long enough to understand what she needs to hear.

"You don't need investors," Johane says, from Vancouver, on the screen. "You need to keep your faith and keep going."

It is exactly the right thing to say. It is also, as it turns out, exactly true.

Donna keeps going.

* * *

The week of launch, Johane calls again.

She has a client. A real hotel. A real business with a real problem that ALFIE is going to solve.

This is the other half of who Johane is. She did not only hold the vision when it was an idea. When the moment came, she went out and made it material. The kindred spirit who kept the faith handed Donna the first proof that the faith had been warranted.

The first one. And it is the first week of summer.

Chapter Seven: The First One Up

On the morning that the first client goes live, Donna is sitting at the same computer where she typed ALFIE's name for the first time.

The island is in full summer now. The days are long and generous, the way they only are here for a few months of the year, and the rust-red earth is green under the sun, and the Gulf is warm enough to swim in, and the light does not leave until late in the evening. It is the season of beginnings. It always has been, on Prince Edward Island.

Ayaz is in Pakistan, watching the deployment logs. Clint, who has been a mentor and loyal friend through every chapter of this story, whose steady belief never wavered and who it is Donna's deep hope will one day be a leader within Protected by ALFIE Inc., that place is held for him, is watching from the wings. Johane, who held the vision and then found the first client the week they launched, is in Vancouver. Ami is recording an episode of Reimagining Digital. Heather is somewhere on the island, probably in a kitchen. Tracey is out there too, telling someone, proud as anything, about the amazing thing her friend built.

None of them were planned. None of them were recruited from a spreadsheet or assembled by design. They found their way here the way the right people always find their way to the right thing, when the thing is true and the person building it refuses to stop.

It takes a village. And when the timing is right, they appear.

It has people who showed up before there was a reason to.

* * *

ALFIE is live. The thing that makes sure a business can be accurately located, found, and identified everywhere it matters, in a search world that machines now run.

But that's not really what the name means.

The name means Alfred. Alfred Joseph Steele. A man who was not a good father and not a good man and who did the best he could with what he had. A

man who, in being who he was, taught his daughter the only lesson she ever truly needed.

Get up.

She owed him that. And now the debt is paid, not to him, but to the world. In the form of a platform that recovers the revenue that businesses lose when AI systems misrepresent them. In the form of verified, trusted data that tells the truth about what a business is, when the systems increasingly deciding who gets found cannot figure it out on their own.

In the form of something that helps.

* * *

And there is Lee.

Through all of it, her son was there, in the same house. He made sure she ate. He made sure she slept. He made sure the woman building the thing did not vanish into it. This past year, the child she raised gave her the care of a man.

ALFIE carries her father's name. Alfred. The man who could not care for her, who gave her only the hard gift of learning to get up. And in the same house where she built the thing named for the father who could not, her son gave her, daily and without being asked, what that father never could.

The man she raised is the man she wishes had raised her.

She has never quite managed to say that to him out loud. Maybe this is where it goes. Maybe a book is where a mother puts the thing that is too large to carry across a kitchen table. The care she went looking for at ten years old, on a set of train tracks with her great aunt's arm around her, did not go out of the world. It came back around. Lee kept it alive. Lee kept her alive. And he still has no idea how completely he did both.

* * *

There is a hotel laundry room in Halifax where an eleven-year-old girl who had just left Prince Edward Island once showed up, lied about her age, and got to work.

She didn't know then what she was starting.

She knows now.

* * *

The first clients are being onboarded. The case studies will follow. The proof points will accumulate. The category that doesn't have a name yet will eventually have one.

And somewhere, the CEO who told Donna to go away and learn to vibe code is still running his platform with its gaping holes, entirely unaware that the woman he dismissed went home to the island she left at eleven and built the thing he didn't know how to build.

She is not thinking about him.

She is thinking about what's next.

* * *

It doesn't matter where you started or where you are.

*The first one to stand back up and keep going
is the one most likely to make it.*

Donna Rougeau

Charlottetown, PEI • Summer 2026

With Gratitude

Every person named in this book gave something that cannot be repaid, only acknowledged, honoured, and carried forward.

This page is for the people who believed before there was a product, a client, or a reason to.

“Donna has a rare combination of deep technical expertise and the ability to see the bigger strategic picture. She doesn’t just understand how things work, she understands why they matter and where they’re going. Working alongside her changed how I think about digital strategy.”

Eric Martineau

Colleague and advocate

“I’ve worked in this industry for a long time and I can count on one hand the people who genuinely see around corners. Donna is one of them. She was talking about entity-based search and AI retrieval before most people had a framework for it. She was right then and she’s right now.”

Mike Hannelly

Industry colleague

To Eva, my great aunt, who chose me when I was ten years old and showed me, first and before anyone else, that I was loved and lovable. You gave me the first gratitude. I have been standing on it ever since.

To Ayaz Yasin, who crossed twelve time zones for no pay because he believed in what we were building. You are my number one hire and my blessing. ALFIE exists because of your precision, your intelligence, and your faith.

To Ami, who is brave and brilliant and who invested herself to ensure I kept going. Your voice deserved to be heard from the beginning. I am honoured to share a microphone with you.

To Clint, my mentor and loyal friend through every chapter. Your steady belief never wavered. Protected by ALFIE Inc. holds a place of leadership for you, whenever you are ready.

To Johane, who held my vision when I could not hold it myself, told me to keep my faith when I had almost nothing left, and then went out and found the first client the week we launched. You are the kind of person the world needs more of.

To Heather, my friend since we were eight years old, who showed up with food when I needed it most. Love and food. Exactly enough.

To Tracey, who has spent her life making sure the women of this island are never alone, and who found me when I came home. When I was down to my last pennies, you loaned me the money for groceries so I could keep building. You could not have explained what I was making, and you backed me anyway. That is the purest faith there is.

To Koray Gubor and Dixon Jones, whose intellectual rigour raised the bar for all of us, and whose encouragement meant everything.

And to every person who ever told me my ideas were too complicated, too much work, or ahead of their time, thank you too. You kept me honest about what I was building and why it had to exist.

And to Lee.

My son. You gave me the care of a man in the year I needed it most, in the same house where I was building everything, making sure I ate, making sure I slept, making sure I did not disappear into the work. The man I raised is the man I wish had raised me. There are not words enough for what you are to me, so I will only say the truest thing I know. Thank you. I love you. You are the best part of all of it.

D.R.

A Note From the Author

Before I finished writing this book, a change was required. As changes so often are.

The company you have just read about was called Re-Imagine That Digital. By the time you hold this, it has a new name. Protected by ALFIE Inc. The reason is ordinary. A business in another province held a name too close to ours, and the registration could not go through. There is no drama in it. There rarely is, in the things that end up mattering.

But I have spent my whole life learning to do one thing when I get knocked down, and that is to get up and look at what is usable in what just happened. And when I looked at the new name, I understood it was the truer one. Re-Imagine That Digital said what we did. Protected by ALFIE says what we give. It puts ALFIE, and everything he is named for, right in the name.

So if you came to this story knowing the old name, this is how the two connect. Same company. Same dream. Same tribe. A better name, found the way I have found most things, by getting up one more time.

Donna Rougeau

Protected by ALFIE Inc., formerly Re-Imagine That Digital

About the Author

Donna Rougeau is the Founder and Chief Information Architect of Protected by ALFIE Inc., and the creator of ALFIE, which makes sure a business is accurately located, found, and identified everywhere it matters, the world's first external entity data management utility for SMB businesses.

She has thirty years of experience in information architecture, digital strategy, technical SEO, and AI-driven search. She is co-host of Reimagining Digital, a podcast available on Spotify, iHeart Radio, and YouTube, with Ami.

She was born on Prince Edward Island, where she still lives and works.

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