TROUBLED HEARTS



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An intriguing narrative, tracking the lives of Linda Dixon and Gina Fallon as they confront societal expectations, and the true meaning of independence.



Chapter One

Linda wondered mid afternoon, if the rainy weather would slow down her heading out to the eastern suburbs? She didn't like being late, perhaps as a kid, she didn't care, but these days as a responsible adult, things were different, on time was on time and late was late.

The rain had been falling in that persistent, misty way, unique to a Melbourne winter. Slicking the bitumen on the main roads heading to the eastern suburbs that turned the tail-lights ahead into a blurred crimson smear. For Linda, the drive from the city wasn't just part of a commute, it was about making a transition. For the last few months, she had been a guest at Aunt Ellie's house two suburbs over, a home that functioned as an informal, quiet sanctuary for women fleeing volatile, manipulative, or downright dangerous partners, Linda however was neither of these.

Ellie's spare room was never truly spare, it was a temporary lifeline. Linda had loved the comfort of it, but she knew that by staying, she was occupying a bed that tomorrow might be needed for a person running for their life from some form of domestic abuse. It was time to stand on her own feet again.

Linda's months of scrolling through rental listings had felt soul-destroying until she found the post for 14 Empress Street, Surrey Hills. Amidst a sea of sterile modern apartments, the listing's photo of a neat picket fence, and the classic cream-and-green trim of a preserved Edwardian facade had felt like a warm invitation.

Leaving the office of the Event Planning Group at 5:00 PM on a Friday was always an exercise in logistics. Linda had sprinted through her final checklists, determined to beat the worst of the Friday gridlock. As she drove, the city's claustrophobic congestion began to yield, the traffic loosening its grip the further east she went.

Instead of relying on the glowing screen of her phone, Linda navigated by memory and paper. Her father had always been vocal about technology making people soft. *'A computer map won't tell you the lay of the land when the battery dies,'* he'd grumble. Honouring his old-school pragmatism, Linda kept a neatly folded, well-thumbed street directory map tucked into the side pocket in her car. Before leaving work, she had traced the route with her finger: the sweep down Swan Street to Riversdale Road, then up Burke Street to Mont Albert Road, then a turn into the quiet, delightfully leafy pockets of Surrey Hills.

By the time she turned into Empress Street, the winter darkness had completely set in. It was 6:45 PM. She had had an amazing run. The street was quiet, flanked by deep gardens and the silhouettes of old trees. She rolled slowly past, watching the numbers shift: 2, 8, 10.. and then, Number 14.

The house loomed gracefully in the twilight. Eight grand timber steps led up to an elevated porch. Through the amber and crimson panes of the leadlight front door, a warm, golden glow spilled onto the wet veranda boards. Linda stepped up, away from the chill, and twisted the traditional ringer bell mounted squarely in the center of the dark timber door. It let out a rich, metallic chime, mellow, bright, and distinctly antique.

Through the filtered glass, a hesitant silhouette materialised. The door opened, easing back gingerly as if the person on the other side was bracing for a threat.

The person who greeted her was Gina Fallon. She offered a warm, albeit slightly tired smile. Quickly launching into the polite, rapid-fire pleasantries of a nervous host. As she ushered Linda into the shelter of the hallway, Gina admitted with quiet candor that she was cautious about who came to the door. Her ex-partner was volatile and prone to erratic behaviour. Though strict measures had been taken to keep this new address hidden from him, the instinct to hide remained. Linda offered a reassuring nod of understanding; living with Aunt Ellie had made her deeply familiar with the hyper-vigilance of recovery.

As they walked, Linda’s eyes were drawn upward to the magnificent timber fretwork archway that elegantly divided the formal front presence of the house from the living quarters at the rear.

Realising she had bypassed the grand tour in her nervousness, Gina paused under the arch. 'Oh, I completely missed the basics,' she laughed softly, gesturing to her surroundings. 'Bedrooms are at the front here. Then we have the formal dining room just to our right, and the bathroom over to the left.'

Gina reached into the bathroom and flicked the switch. The light revealed a beautiful renovation that perfectly balanced utility with heritage. Above the pristine sink, a fanned-out, arched leadlight window caught the light, casting soft hues across a clean vanity, a deep bath, and a modern shower. 'The landlord is incredibly reasonable,' Gina noted. 'He did the updates recently and generally leaves me to my own devices.'

They moved into the main living area, a space that instantly felt like home. The floor was laid with deep grey slate tiles, softened by a plush, white sheepskin rug positioned in front of an open brick fireplace. To the left, a compact but highly functional kitchen bordered the space, while a set of elegant French doors at the back looked out into a dark, rain-swept backyard.

Gina had a portable fan heater humming to take the bite out of the air, and she was on her knees trying to coax a pile of wood into a fire. As they sat down to chat about their lives, Linda watched Gina struggle at the hearth. Gina was trying hard, but she had stacked the heavy logs directly on top of unlit paper, completely choking the oxygen. Internally, Linda giggled, her country upbringing screaming at her to intervene, but she politely held her tongue, appreciating the effort.

Sitting in the glow of the room, the differences between the two women became apparent. Gina was conservatively and immaculately presented. She wore her mouse-brown hair in a neat, sensible bob with a straight fringe. Her outfit, a traditional wool kilt paired with a lightweight cardigan in muted tones of tan and light brown, looked like the perfect uniform for her corporate management role at a prominent consulting firm, Appleby and Johnson. She was academic, articulate, and structured.

Linda, by contrast, was a self-described tomboy. Dressed for the hands-on, fast-paced world of event coordination, she was practical, physically capable, and used to getting her hands dirty when she had to.

When the feeble flames Gina had kindled inevitably choked and died, Gina laughed it off, completely unfazed, preferring to focus on the conversation. 'Tea or coffee?' she offered, rising from the rug.

'Do you happen to have hot chocolate?' Linda asked.

'Yes, yes I do,' Gina smiled, heading into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

The moment Gina cleared the room, Linda slid onto the hearth. Moving with practiced efficiency, she cleared the collapsed wood, rearranged the kindling into a loose, breathable tepee, and struck a fresh match. By the time Gina walked back into the lounge carrying two steaming mugs, the fireplace was starting to glow with warm flames. The kindling crackled sharply, spitting a few stray sparks safely against the fireguard, and the rich, nostalgic aroma of burning eucalyptus began to fill the room.

Gina stopped in her tracks, her eyes wide with surprise and genuine delight at the sudden emerging wall of warmth.

Over the hot chocolate, the conversation deepened. They traced the wildly different maps of their youth. Gina had grown up in an affluent suburb of Melbourne, attending a strict private girls' school and learning the piano. Linda had grown up in the dust and wide-open spaces of the country, attending a small local high school. She had always wanted to learn an instrument, but the opportunity simply didn't exist out there, a fact she recounted without bitterness, just as a plain reality.

However, Linda had paths of her own. When Gina learned that Linda was trained in Karate and practical, close quarter, self-defence, Gina was in awe, Linda downplayed it with a modest smile, though she did share a brief story about an aggressive man who had turned up at Aunt Ellie's house to cause trouble. Linda had stepped onto the porch, stood her ground, and single-handedly sent the harasser packing with ‘a bit more than a bruised ego’, before he could step a foot inside.

The revelation made Gina look at Linda with newfound respect. Gina’s own story was heavier. Her five-year-old child was currently living with Gina's mother. The legalities were exhausting; her ex-partner was a deeply controlling man, who had used the child as a tool for emotional exhaustion. There was a sense of unconscious cruelty that took place, coercive control and so much more.

It was only when Gina's father Graham, intervened with intricate, yet powerful legal counsel with a focus on new family law reforms, that they secured a strict court order forbidding him from contacting Gina. When Nigel tried to fight for custody, the magistrate firmly denied it, granting residency to Gina's mother instead. Now, Gina saw her child on weekends. Nigel was granted supervised visits, but half the time, he didn't even bother showing up.

Appreciating the weight of the story, Linda quietly reached over, picked up a split log from the basket, and nestled it perfectly into the heart of the coals, poking the kindling to let the draft through.

Gina watched her, a look of immense relief washing over her face. 'Well, if nothing else, you can definitely stay here to look after the fire.'

Linda laughed. 'I used to split the timber and manage two wood stoves back home. This is easy, this fire draws really well.'

With the air cleared and a mutual trust establishing, the remaining details fell into place effortlessly. They discussed the rent and bond, both agreeing the terms were fair. After an hour of seamless conversation, Gina led Linda back to the front of the house to look at the available bedroom. It was a reasonable size, full of period charm, and already contained a sturdy bed. Across the hall, a spare room held an alternative mattress if the current one wasn't to her liking.

Standing in the warm hallway, Linda knew she had found her next step. They shook hands and agreed on a weekend move-in date. Linda was finally moving out on her own, and Gina had found a housemate who could bring both some added security and differing degrees of warmth to the house.

Chapter Two

Saturday afternoon arrived with a crispness that suited new beginnings. Linda's car was packed to the roof, the rear suspension sagging slightly under the weight of her life. Initially, she and Aunt Ellie had calculated one trip at most. It took two. Each time Linda pulled back up to the driveway, she and Ellie shared a look of amused resignation. Linda didn't consider herself a materialist, but a few years of steady income had a way of stealthily accumulating 'things', the slow, quiet gathering of books, kitchenware, a small desk and corporate attire that marks the transition from transient youth to established adulthood.

By early evening, the physical effort of lifting boxes had settled in. When Gina suggested sharing a pizza, the agreement was instant. It was a perfect, uncomplicated solution: no sizzling pans, no timed ovens, and a minimal cleanup that consisted of closing a cardboard lid.

Huddled around the warm box of the freshly delivered pizza, the conversation flowed with a natural, easy rhythm. Gina had spent the morning with her daughter, Christine, and the shadow of an upcoming Sunday schedule hung lightly in her mind. Her ex-partner, Nigel, was locked into a strict visitation routine at Christine's grandparents' house.

'He only ever stays for an hour,' Gina murmured, tracing the edge of her paper napkin. 'It's the supervision. He can't handle being under their roof, knowing he's being watched.'

Gina described him with a mix of lingering weariness and sharp clarity. Nigel was intelligent, in a clinical, calculating way, but he possessed a deeply volatile, coercive streak. During their time together, Gina had lived within a tightly curated cage. He dictated the image she projected to the world, vetted her friendships, and whittled her social circle down to a sanctioned list of family members.

Linda listened, a profound sense of familiarity washing over her. Through Aunt Ellie's devotion to supporting survivors of domestic abuse, Linda had heard variations of Nigel's tactics dozens of times. The names changed, but the architecture of control remained identical. Gina occasionally received text messages from Nigel, he wanted them to be together again, he wanted to be back as a family. There was never any talk of changing his behaviour. Linda's blunt advice, '*Remove him from your contacts*.'

Gina's escape had been forged by her own family. Her father, Graham, had finally stepped into the fray, physically removing Gina and the baby from Nigel's orbit. Graham was a formidable man, tall, assertively built, with a vice-like handshake that acted as a powerful but silent declaration of authority. His presence could alter the air pressure in a room, and very few people possessed the nerve to cross him.

Gina looked across the table at Linda, eyes narrowing slightly in contemplation. 'You know,' Gina added softly, 'You have a bit of him in you. That same quiet weight. That refusal to be shifted, OH I mean that in a nice way!'

As the night deepened, the two women explored the terrain of their differences. Linda viewed the world through an egalitarian lens; she completely dismissed gender barriers in her daily life. 'I stand shoulder to shoulder with pretty much anyone,' Linda stated plainly. 'In the workplace or out of it, the work is the work, and the person is the person.'

Gina offered a gentler, more traditional counterpoint. 'I think I see myself as a woman first and foremost. It shapes how I navigate spaces and people.'

'Do you think that holds you back?' Linda asked, genuinely curious. 'In corporate settings, does that identity become a vulnerability?'

Gina paused, admitting she hadn't actively noticed it yet, though Linda's blunt question planted a seed of future observation and reflection.

What Gina did admire, was Linda's unshakeable sense of self-worth. Gina's own confidence had been systematically eroded, not just by Nigel's overt manipulation, but by years spent within the rigid hierarchy of St Eileen's, a prestigious all-girls private school.

'Private schools have a very particular brand of cruelty,' Gina reflected, looking into her empty glass. 'It's rarely physical. It's social exclusion, a subtle, elegant bullying that makes you question your own value. I always shrank away from the nastiness, but the people who openly challenged the bullies usually ended up somehow internalising the idea that they were less worthy.'

Linda studied Gina's guarded posture. 'The victim mindset?' she suggested gently, testing the boundary.

Gina took a slow breath. 'I guess so. It seems to be a hard thing to break.'

Their methods of survival could not have been more distinct. Linda tackled obstacles head-on with a stoic, sometimes aggressive force, believing that some problems simply required *a heavy shoulder* to break through a barrier. Gina preferred a genteel, diplomatic approach, defusing tension rather than confronting it. They traded hypothetical scenarios late into the night, *'Yeah, but what if a colleague takes credit for your project?'* or *'How do you handle a flat-out refusal from management?'* Each privately realising that their own methodology could be vastly improved by adopting a piece of the other's style.

When the topic shifted to parenting, Gina's voice took on an intense, protective gravity. 'I want Christine to grow up in a neutral world. I don't want her childhood infected by the power struggles and control dynamics that ruin so many relationships.'

'We learn from our parents first, then our peers,' Linda replied, her eyelids growing heavy as midnight approached. 'We can't control the schoolyard, but as parents, we can establish the blueprint. It's about positive, practical examples.'

Exhaustion was blurring Linda's sharp edges. 'Give me a concrete example,' she requested, leaning her head back.

'If you want your daughter to be radical, strong, and entirely independent,' Gina said, her voice steady and resolute, 'You have to live that way in front of her. In the way you carry yourself, the boundaries you set, and the things you refuse to compromise on. You have to be the first decent role model she sees.'

Gina nodded in agreement, noting that the long day of moving and deep talking had finally caught up to both of them.

Sunday unfolded with the slow, luxurious pace of a weekend sanctuary. Gina left early to visit Christine, and a later text message from her mother confirmed that Nigel's hour-long duty had concluded without incident. On her way out, Gina had paused at the doorway, a genuine smile lifting her face. 'Oh, great chat last night, by the way. You gave me a lot of fascinating things to think about. See you later.'

Linda watched her go, pleased that the intensity of the conversation hadn't overwhelmed her new housemate. Reflecting on Gina, Linda observed the deep-seated conservatism that governed her demeanor. From her impeccably neat posture to her classic, ultra-traditional wardrobe Gina radiated an aura of quiet conformity. Linda, by contrast, lived with a more footloose and fancy-free philosophy, sharply professional when a client meeting demanded it, but entirely casual and unbothered the moment she punched the clock.

To clear her head, Linda went for a walk around the block, absorbing the autumn scenery of Surrey Hills. The grand old oak trees lining Mont Albert Road had dropped a thick, lustrous carpet of deep brown leaves that crunched satisfyingly under her shoes. The steady hum of suburban traffic gave way to a serene stillness as she turned onto Empress Road. Here, the neighborhood softened into a more reflective quiet rhythm, punctuated only by the distant, rhythmic purr of a lawnmower keeping the nature strips neatly manicured.

When Linda returned, she tended to the domestic chores. She split a fresh supply of firewood, stacking the logs into a neat, accessible pile beside the house and securing a heavy plastic tarp over the top to protect it from the unpredictable Melbourne winter.

By the time Gina returned two hours later, looking bright and refreshed, Linda had stoked the indoor fireplace. The living room was filled with a deep, radiant heat.

As the kettle began to whistle, they sat down to discuss how Christine's afternoon had gone, which naturally evolved into a deeper conversation about the origins of their personalities. Gina traced her behavioral traits directly back to her mother, with St Eileen's school reinforcing those lessons of quiet etiquette. Linda acknowledged a similar path, learning practical resilience from her mother, while her school years had left very little impression on her.

'What about your father?' Linda asked, leaning forward over her mug. 'What specific values, beliefs, or skills did you inherit from him?'

Gina opened her mouth to answer, but stopped. The list she managed to articulate was remarkably brief, mostly centered around his physical protection rather than shared philosophies.

'Maybe you learned more from him than you realise,' Linda observed quietly. 'Or maybe you need to figure out what gaps he left behind, and what you want to learn now.'

The thought hung in the air, leaving Gina in a state of quiet contemplation. *I should make a literal list,* Gina thought to herself, realising how little she had questioned the architecture of her own upbringing.

Seeking a lighter topic, Gina shifted the focus to her professional life. 'I think need to adjust my wardrobe,' she admitted, looking down at her clothes. 'The other women at the office.. they just seem to possess a different level of effortless style. I sometimes feel a bit stuck.'

Gina led Linda into her bedroom, opening the closet doors to reveal an exceptionally neat, uniform collection of clothing. It was a sea of muted earth tones: tans, chocolate browns, and conservative cream blouses. Linda scanned the rails, her eyes widening slightly.

'There isn't a single pair of jeans in here, is there?' Linda asked.

'My mother always told me slacks were acceptable for errands, but skirts and structured dresses belong in a professional environment,' Gina said defensively, though she looked and felt uneasy saying it out loud.

Linda marched back to her computer, inviting Gina to join her, and pulled up the official website for her company Appleby and Johnson. She navigated to the 'About Us' and 'Team' pages, showing Gina the portraits of the female staff. The employees were young, vibrant, and impeccably styled in modern corporate-casual attire, tailored trousers, sharp blazers over simple tees, and smart, contemporary cuts that were lightyears away from Gina’s rigid ensembles.

Gina stared at the screen, her eyes wide with a mixture of intimidation and desire.

'Look,' Linda said, checking her wristwatch. 'The local mall closes in an hour and a half. If you want to change how people perceive you at work, you need to stop analysing it.

Grab your keys. If you want to, we're going to find a few modern pieces you can mix and match into what you already own but only if you want to?'

Gina's eyes went completely round, her expression mirroring a deer caught squarely in a pair of high-beam headlights. 'Will you come with me? Hold my hand through it?'

Linda let out a short, amused smirk. She rarely played the role of a shopping consultant, but the genuine vulnerability in Gina's eyes was impossible to reject. 'Yeah, why not. Let's go.'

The ensuing hour was a whirlwind of changing rooms, fabric textures, and gentle boundary-pushing/exploring. Linda encouraged Gina just slightly out of her comfort zone, selecting modern tailored slacks and deep jewel-toned tops that complemented her natural elegance without making her feel exposed.

They burst through the shopping center exit doors five minutes before closing time, shopping bags clutched in hand. Gina was glowing with an adrenaline-fueled smile, Linda walked beside her with a broad grin, thoroughly enjoying the pending transformation of her delightfully conservative friend.

The weekend wardrobe session turned into an unexpected masterclass in transformation. Spreading the clothes across the bed, Linda and Gina experimented with combinations neither of them would have thought to pair. Linda watched with quiet satisfaction as Gina's initial hesitation melted into genuine surprise. Some items they thought would be flawless fell flat, while an overlooked, jewel-toned blouse paired with tailored trousers suddenly made Gina stand out.

By Monday morning, the atmosphere at work had shifted. Gina walked into the office carrying herself differently, wearing one of the newly discovered outfits and a bright, unforced smile. When she returned home that evening, there was a flush of excitement on her cheeks. She eagerly told Linda how several colleagues had stopped by her desk, explicitly mentioning how vibrant and polished she looked.

Linda listened, smiling warmly, while a wave of self-reflection washed over her. *Who knew I could actually guide someone through fashion choices?* she thought. The moment triggered a memory from her own university days, back when she was just a clueless country girl arriving in the bustling city. In those days, Linda hadn't known the first thing about style, and truth be told, she hadn't cared. She remembered thinking back then that if anyone sneered

at her wardrobe, she could simply drop them with a swift, sweeping karate kick and leave them eating dirt. Of course, she never actually had to resort to martial arts, and that was entirely thanks to the patient, wise intervention of Aunt Ellie, who had gently polished her rough edges. Now, the cycle was seemingly repeating.

A few days later, the conversation turned toward hair. Sitting on the couch, they pulled up a styling app that allowed users to upload a photo and overlay different styles. Linda's long, versatile locks could be styled a dozen different ways, whereas Gina's standard, slightly overgrown bob with a heavy fringe offered little flexibility.

Staring at the screen, Linda felt a flash of inspiration. 'Well, you can go shorter, or you can grow it out. Shorter means losing the option of a ponytail, while longer means a lot more maintenance. Do you actually wear it up often?'

'Not really,' Gina replied, her eyes fixed on the digital transformations. 'Only when it gets messy and I just need to tie it back out of the way.'

'When was the last time you actually changed your style?' Linda asked casually.

Gina paused, her expression softening into something distant. 'About seven years ago, when I met Nigel. He told me I looked best with this specific bob and said I shouldn't ever change it. So, I just.. never did. I wasn't really allowed to.' She let out a small, tentative breath. 'I suppose now I can make my own decisions.'

The casual admission hit Linda like a physical blow. She had never tolerated that level of control from anyone in her own life, and the sheer restrictiveness of Gina's past relationship left her stunned. As Linda asked a few gentle questions, a deeply unsettling conversation began to unravel, revealing just how much of Gina's identity had been dictated by someone else. Linda could only shake her head in quiet disbelief. In that moment, a profound realisation clicked into place: this was exactly why so many women ended up seeking refuge at Aunt Ellie's house. They weren't just escaping places; they were rebuilding shattered autonomy that weakened them physically and emotionally.

Refusing to let the heavy mood linger, Gina steered the conversation back to the app, noting that while longer hair sounded nice, something significantly shorter might feel incredibly freeing. Linda chimed in with a supportive smile. 'You know, when it comes to a change like this, it's always best to consult an expert.' Inspired, Gina saved a few of her

favorite digital mock-ups to her phone, mentioning that one of her closest colleagues at work had a fantastic eye for hair and styling.

When Friday evening arrived, Linda returned home at her usual hour, expecting a quiet night. An hour later, the front door clicked open and Gina walked in, practically glowing. She was sporting a new hairstyle, sleek and slightly longer at the front, but tapered into a sharp, short, and gently layered style at the back that framed her face perfectly.

Linda gasped in delight, utterly caught off guard. She was thrilled that Gina had kept the salon appointment a secret, thoroughly enjoying the wonderful surprise. 'Gina, it looks lovely!'

For the next few minutes, Gina stood in front of the mirror, holding a hand mirror with practiced care to inspect the layered back from every angle. Her eyes shone with a mixture of disbelief and pride. Linda grabbed her phone and took several photos from different angles, giving Gina a permanent record of her transformation to look back on.

'It feels so strange,' Gina murmured, running her fingers through the back of her hair. 'A bit.. breezier.'

Linda hid a chuckle, thinking that removing inches of thick hair resulting in a breezier feeling was an absolute no-brainer, but she suppressed the urge to tease. Instead, she watched Gina with a deep, contented smile. It was a striking turning point. Not long ago, Linda had found Gina’s emotional vulnerability entirely baffling. Now, looking at her new found friend standing tall in the mirror, she realised that beneath that fragile exterior lay a quiet, resilient strength.

Gina, meanwhile, looked at Linda's reflection in the glass. For a long time, Linda’s fierce independence and effortless decision-making had felt somehow intimidating to her. But as she felt the cool air on the nape of her neck, Gina realised the intimidation was fading, replaced by something entirely new. She was finally tasting what it felt like to choose her own path. Somehow there was some form of emotional shift in Gina. She noted that images of her mother providing direction were becoming less important and the actual image in her head of her mother was becoming smaller.

The images of Nigel calling the ‘shots’ on the various aspects of their relationship and how Gina did things, and with whom, would be harder to shift. She did however realise that the shift was now possible and needed to happen.



Chapter Three

Linda's uniform wasn't just the black utility trousers, and a heavy-duty radio clipped to her belt; it was the persona she wore with them. At Event Planning Group, surviving the grueling pack-downs of major trade expos required grit. Linda had grit. She could direct a crew of stubborn forklift drivers, encourage and influence an irate union rep, then survive a 14-hour shift on concrete floors without a single complaint.

But lately, the mirror was telling a different story. In her fierce determination to nudge her way to the top, Linda realised she had been playing by a masculine playbook. She spoke in sharp, clipped directives. She suppressed her natural empathy, fearing that showing warmth could be misconstrued as weakness, and that expressing intuition would label her 'emotional.' She had effectively locked away her creative and female energy, trading her innate flair for a rigid, stoic efficiency just to earn the respect of the old guard.

Officially, Linda was the indispensable sidekick to her team leader, Marcus. Her days were a dizzying kaleidoscope of logistics. One week she was mapping out the delicate aesthetics of a high-end winery wedding; the next, she was coordinating the rigorous compliance grids for a three-day medical convention.

Linda was aiming for a senior supervisory role, hungry to shift from manual 'firefighting' to higher-level critical thinking. On the rare occasions she was seconded to the forward-planning team, her unique skill set shone. When a supply chain collapse threatened to leave a major sustainability workshop without materials, Linda didn't just find a backup vendor, she redesigned the interactive spaces using recycled, locally sourced materials, saving the budget and elevating the event's theme.

Marcus saw her brilliance. Upper management noticed it too. But standing directly in her path was Dale. Dale had been at Event Planning Group three years longer than Linda. He possessed half her drive and none of her innovative vision, relying instead on stale, paint-by-numbers event templates. Yet, in a corporate culture that often combined tenure with capability, Dale was the default favorite.

When Linda finally cornered the operations director to discuss her career trajectory, the conversation was frustratingly fluid. *'You're doing a really decent job, Linda. We're looking*

at restructuring soon,' he said. 'No promises. No timelines.' She saw it as just a vague carrot dangled over her head. She found out later that Dale had undermined her in subtle ways, mentioning to other area supervisors that she had 'emotional moments' and had hidden a range of challenges and mistakes that few people knew about, but if tackled she would lose it in some 'emotional damage' kind of way.

She and Dale got on just fine, but on finding out that he was undermining her, she let him take a higher role, figuring that he would make a mistake, being unable to fully understand what was required in the role. She figured he would fail fairly quickly, perhaps not in an obvious way, but she thought it would be interesting to watch him squirm under pressure.

Linda was tired of people getting in her way; she was looking for a change, the sort of role and company who could see her strengths, not undermine her and value her input.

The breaking point arrived at the Annual Australasian Events Symposium in Sydney. Surrounded by hundreds of industry professionals, Linda finally stepped out from the shadow of Event Planning Group's logo.

During the evening networking galas, she found herself in conversation with management executives from rival firms. Stripping away her usual defensive corporate armor, Linda spoke candidly about 'corporate movements' and market stagnation. The advice she received from these seasoned leaders was a revelation:

- **Visibility over anonymity:** Doing great work in the dark gets you nowhere; you must be seen doing it.
- **Authentic authority:** True power comes from being true to yourself, not mimicking someone else's style.
- **The mastery of leverage:** Leadership is entirely rooted in advanced communication and negotiation.
- **The 'fixer' reputation:** In the event industry, chaos is guaranteed. The people who rise are those who solve unpredictable problems in an instant through creative, lateral thinking.

Waiting for her flight home at Sydney Airport, the advice buzzed in her mind. A display in the terminal bookstore caught her eye. The title was bold, but the subtitle hooked her: *A Step-by-Step Guide to Getting More for Less.* She bought it.

By the time the aircraft touched down in Melbourne, Linda had devoured half the book, scribbling notes in the margins. In the back of the taxi crawling down the Tullamarine Freeway, she used her phone to dive deeper, researching executive leadership courses and top-tier management literature.

She began synthesising her findings into a digital masterlist of traits defining highly effective leaders:

1. **Emotional Intelligence (EQ) as a Strength:** Shifting from rigid control to active listening and empathy to build unshakeable team loyalty. Calm and assertive.
2. **High-Stakes Calibrated Questioning:** Using open-ended questions (*'How can we solve this?'* rather than *'Do this'*) to control the room without aggression.
3. **Creative Resourcefulness:** Viewing logistical bottlenecks not as walls, but as opportunities for distinct, memorable event design.
4. **Firm, Fair and Friendly:** People like working with people they like, so be likeable, but set boundaries and clear expectations, be fair and friendly to bring things together.

Of all the connections Linda made, the most impactful was Alice Waring, the formidable Managing Director of *Newsome Events*, one of Event Planning Group's most progressive competitors. Alice had handed Linda her personal email and LinkedIn details with a genuine, *'Keep in touch, Linda. You have a sharp mind.'*

While waiting for her luggage at the carousel, Linda's phone buzzed. It was an email from Alice. Far from a generic 'good to meet you' note, Alice had sent a thoughtful list of follow-up questions based on their brief chat about industry trends, testing Linda's perspectives on market changes.

Linda didn't hesitate. Seated in the back of the cab, she drafted a prompt, articulate response, answering the questions with a blend of her practical field experience and her newfound strategic insight. At the end of the email, she added a touch of vulnerable authenticity:

> *'I picked up a copy of 'Getting More for Less' at the airport terminal based on our conversation about negotiation. I'm halfway through it on the flight back to*

Melbourne, specifically looking at how to apply its principles to our upcoming peak event season.'

Alice's reply landed the next morning, sparking a mentorship and professional alliance that could positively change the trajectory of Linda's career. For the first time, Linda saw a blueprint for success that didn't require her to hide her female identity or her creativity, it required her to leverage them.

Arriving home to Surrey Hills, Gina was all ears wanting to hear about the conference. Linda showed her the book she purchased and a discussion broke out about professionalism and the role women play in the corporate world. It became a mixed debate, feminism ruled, then manliness pushed its way forward, and then it went back and forth as different aspects revealed themselves.

The pair struck on the notion of work bots or Ai Agents, robots that would take a whole bunch of jobs and create a whole new workforce, gender would not be an issue for the Ai Agents, perhaps they might have a female presentation on the outside for customer service roles where they need the 'feminine touch' but other than that they would have all the talents and tool required to do their job. They could do it all day and night, stopping only to recharge, but another Ai Agent could take over.

The thought arose, well what if we acted and operated like Ai Agents? No care about gender issues, and in fact we should have a way of dealing with those. Linda was quite firm on the issue and mentioned, 'Get Karate and self defence training and turn it into verbal self defence and in the process discover ninja whispering.'

Gina looked at her in disbelief, and mentioned that it sounded very aggressive. Linda gave an example, 'A guy with more strength than you gives you a hard time in practically any situation, with the aim of controlling or intimidating you for some reason. Then to create a level playing field where both are respected, requires some level of 'force.' You need, at times, to push back and be assertive perhaps not physically but in other ways.'

Gina's mind went straight to having to deal with Nigel, her ex partner. She then looked straight at Linda and stated. 'I get it, Nigel and I had issues and he always got his way, and often it wasn't the right way, or best way and I copped it, mainly mentally but occasionally physically as well, it wasn't good. My mother said it was how it was in relationships, my father said NO, you don't have to live like that, if you are not happy with the situation CHANGE IT! It wasn't long after that dad stepped in and took me out of the picture. It was a

challenging time but I see now that he literally saved my life. Too many people die or suffer badly from domestic abuse. Nigel still contacts me from time to time, wanting to get back together.'

The pair sat in silence for a moment, Linda taking in the details, and Gina slightly shell shocked that she had a realisation about her situation.

Linda sat back and said, 'So we are both wanting a gender free situation where we are respected, no matter our talents and skill level. But we have a bunch of factors that control us, the companies we work for, our upbringing, the peers we have as friends who encourage and or discourage us, and then the wider social factors that impact our everyday lives, like being females.'

The pair discussed various scenarios and situations, Gina came to realise that she had more negative situations than Linda, but she also had things that were challenging, especially at work.

Chapter Four

Gina and Linda were both beholden to their thoughts, revelations about aggressive approaches, subtle ones and everything in between. In a discussion with Alice about the issues discussed, Alice mentioned Germaine Greer's books, 'The Female Eunuch' and 'Untamed Shrew' as possible reading options to expose the female role in society and then business. Linda was now of the opinion that she was heading towards becoming a female leader in a very male based business world. She wanted to be 'womanly,' whatever that really meant, and at the same time wanted to be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with her male counterparts, be very true to herself and of sensible value to the team, as well as herself.

She had seen examples in films of women being downtrodden and then rising to a position of strength but she always felt like the struggle was somehow false, and it was an almost *Disney* based approach, loaded with niceties and fluttering eyes to get a result. Why struggle? Why resort to fluttering eyes to make your presence known and felt? Alice had given her a clue, 'Walk away from demanding idiots.' Linda wanted to explore that in some detail, but not just yet. She also said in passing, *Don't be afraid of your fire*.

Gina on the other hand was now contemplating things from a different angle, in the discussions leading up to this point she had noted how she and Linda were rather different, their upbringings and approaches. She had heard of Germaine Greer and knew the face, but little about what her books were about. On the computer she looked up a synopsis of both books and delved in further. She noted that Greer's focus seemed to be on women being 'de vitalised', by a range of conditioning options.

She also realised she was deep in the middle of all that and beginning to realise where she was, and was now exploring what she wanted to do about it.

More discussions with Linda, which led to 'I want to know more about the hard core things that made you what you are today, I see that you have a strength about you that I don't yet have.' Linda countered with 'You have other qualities that I don't possess either, both of us have talents of value to the other. We can explore that, if you want?'

Linda warned Gina that learning about her 'physical talents' would be more than just physically challenging, but mentally difficult as well. Some demons may arise that could need quelling. Gina said, 'okay, I think I need to do this, somehow, bugger it, lets go!

Linda asked her to stand up and look away for a moment, and then punched Gina in the arm. 'OWW' shrieked Gina, 'I didn't expect that!' Linda then looked her dead in the eye, 'Yep things can happen at the drop of a hat, and you my dear need to have your wits about you, ready for any eventuality, be prepared girl! I am going to hold you to your goal, and the steps to achieve it along the way, but only if that is really what you want?'

Gina rubbed her arm and sheepishly said 'Yes…'

Linda raised a finger, as if to suggest, 'Wait there.' She disappeared to her room and came out with an exercise book and a pen. 'Here's where it starts, list your strengths and weaknesses in two or three columns in point form, physical, mental and I guess 'other.' you need to be honest with yourself.

Gina sat and pondered, Linda wandered off to put some washing on. Then returned to find Gina struggling to come up with points. They had a general discussion and explored what she wanted, against what she had. That raised a few extra points. Linda didn't want to push things too much at this stage, but was looking for starting points.

The day was still young and Gina was set to head off and visit Christine. Linda suggested they regroup after lunch, and besides, the weather was meant to clear up this afternoon.

By the time Gina returned, Linda had looked at her list, and figured out a few strategies. Starting with a walk and chat. She asked Gina how far she thought she could walk, half an hour, an hour or more? Gina indicated half an hour would be more than enough.

Sneakers on, let's go. Linda had a planned out walk that took them to Maling road along past the shops then up Balwyn road, the pair chatted as they went, led by Linda poking and proding Gina's strengths and weaknesses. Why this, why that, and how will changing this and that help?

Linda had an idea, risky but probably worth it. They returned home and put on some warmer clothes, then headed back toward the train station, hopped on and headed into central Melbourne. Linda had figured out that Gina had little understanding of what being at risk was like, and how things might change, and what it might be like to be in an awkward situation.

Linda had an idea of where homeless and mentally unstable people might hang out and then there were silly teens on skate boards, scooters and the like. By the time they walked about and through various groups of people they had added a lot more time to their initial walking time. Gina didn't notice too much, she was too busy watching people as they wandered about.

By the time they got home it was getting late in the evening, a lot was discussed on the way home after a light meal at an inner city cafe. Where they may have faced some level of danger, and how to pick out the loud and disturbed who were harmless. Then strategies for how to deal with any of this had things gone bad.

Gina realised that she didn't know much about being street wise, then the topic turned to how this might relate to organisational survival and ways to thrive rather than just survive. Knowing when to walk away and when to stay and fight.

Gina was able to add to her list of strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter Five

Sunday morning, it was about nine am, Linda had been up for a while, Gina wandered out bleary eyed, she had slept well, totally worn out physically from yesterday's walk and chat, walk and observe, and all that. Today would involve some more walking, but perhaps not quite as much, a few chats, seeing what could be done, what should be done and then see what would come from there.

Things went well, concepts explored. Linda was also exploring her positive and not so hot points, but wasn't about to make them public until Gina enquired, if at all. That way it would look like Linda had been working on her 'things' for a longer time. A clever tactic, well she thought so anyway.

Linda thought it would be useful to get back into self defence training and was wanting Gina to come to the realisation that she needed something along those lines as well. Linda figured it wouldn't be long before that happened, she had a hunch about that one. Linda then started researching what was available and what would work the best. Some fitness and some defence techniques, ranging from verbal self defence to full on close quarter combat.

In amongst all this her brain kept coming back to two main things, 'Keep your wits about you' and 'Be prepared.' Gina went to visit Christine, the all clear was given by her mother. Linda watched Gina go out the door, she had a spring in her step in some ways and was wearing more casual clothing, is that a pair of jeans? Yep, casual, comfortable.

On her return one of the questions Linda asked was 'How was your mother with your more casual clothing choices?' Gina smirked, she wasn't too keen at first, but today Dad complemented me and mum wasn't far behind. With a positive comment. Chris liked it too, it meant we were able to hang out in the backyard and kick a ball around, she liked that and so did I. It's not something I would have contemplated in the past but hey, we're doing a few things differently, so why not.'

Linda had taken the time out to research assertiveness for women, and had collated and printed a list of bullet points on various aspects to explore. They read through it, then went walking. Discussing as they went. They even loosely role played a few points as they went.

Gina had a few points where she had been treated as a passive object, rather than a person with skills and abilities. She realised that this caused her to have memories of being

controlled by Nigel. The pair chatted about ways to get around that and not just passively take on dud tasks and roles at work.

Gina hadn't been at the company for long, about 10 months, she was fortunate to get a position there based on a government based support program. Linda asked if she had a mentor at work, Yes she did, but they are a bit of a dud, 'Keely can dot the I's and cross the T's but not much else. I think I need to find a decent in-house mentor.'

Gina mentioned self defence, Linda listened carefully, doing her best not to intervene with ideas too early on. Linda asked questions to help Gina clarify things in her own mind, situations, types of attacks and so on. Linda had a file on her computer with a range of resources on verbal self defence and then simple techniques to block and discourage an attacker. Slowly but surely over time she would say she found some resources and shared them with Gina.

The verbal responses were first and foremost, then ensuring you avoided places where an attack might happen, and screaming loudly to gather attention from others if required, and then onto techniques to avoid choking and blocking hits from an assailant. A few minutes here and there soon lead to lengthier discussions and approaches.

Linda recalled a big thing she was taught in karate training from years ago, 'Most people are not used to getting hit and therefore go into some form of shock if an attacker *does their thing*, the key here, is to not just get used to being hit during sparing training, but instinctively knowing what to do when it happens.' She decided to practice blocking techniques with Gina, it turned out to be a solid warm up and helped Gina to gain awareness.

At work when things were quiet, Gina looked up defence technique videos, then watched various techniques in use. Females with a black belt level skills being put to task with a street fighter, some of those didn't have good outcomes for the black belts.. Then others where the person was able to avoid an assailant easily while others used a mix of techniques to overcome a stronger opponent.

Gina then got on with doing some work, an email caught her attention and an in house training opportunity on next level OHS and risk management was amongst the sessions on offer. The form was filled out and put forward to her supervisor Jane Holmes. She said yes, Jane had been caught out before, holding back on employees getting extra training, she didn't want HR to pester her again. One reprimand from HR was more than enough.

Her mentor, Keeley was notified as a matter of standard protocol, she was pleased. A few weeks later an outside seminar was on offer on some aspects of the in house software the company used. Gina jumped at that. Time out of the building and still being paid was a big bonus in her books.

She was now actively looking for these kinds of opportunities. In the process she was able to get amongst staff in other departments of Appleby and Johnson. One of the people was in HR, Rose Williams, who was a stalwart for professional development.

Surveys went around those actively involved in recent training and asked for ideas for new skill development. Linda and Gina brainstormed, Gina added to her list, assertiveness training, advanced communication skills that included 'Ninja Whispering.' Leadership, Negotiation, and Innovation.

HR wanted to know what 'Ninja Whispering' was, she looked up a google reference and it suggested communicating by stealth, most likely talk therapy as well. The company had an in-house leadership program, but it was usually reserved for people at a slightly higher level in the organisation, or people who had been there longer than 18 months in a position that required supervisory skills or worked in active teams. Keely was asked, she said yes and Gina was now part of a program that took place for one morning each week over ten weeks.

Linda was impressed, and of course Gina was too.

The pair had now checked out some self defence options, one karate dojo pointed out to Linda that there was a Karate tournament that they could check out next Sunday, the Sensei pointed out that it was a good way for a beginner to see what was possible. They went, they watched, and together they pointed out various strengths and weaknesses that participants exhibited. Gina was in awe and was then very much in agreement with doing karate classes. The pair were soon signed up and ready to go. Linda was a fabulous karate mate, able to show Gina correct stances and techniques. Saturday afternoon walks for exercise were getting easier and a bit longer as the weather warmed up heading into summer.

Some research after discussing things with the dojo Sensei, saw Gina checking out Aikido karate, and ju jitsu techniques. More techniques to add to her arsenal, both designed for people with less strength than their opponent.

The at home sparing, with blocking and feigning continued. Then rapid fire tapping, where you aim to tap the other person on the arms, shoulders or main torso getting past their

defences, the other person has to acknowledge the ‘attackers’ touch while doing their best to dodge and or deflect the strike. There were giggles and points of refinement. Gina found it fascinating that such simple actions could be so hard to avoid. Skills were building, talents being exposed, and yes, that was a good thing.

Chapter Six

Our pair were comparing notes, where they were at, where they had been and where they were aiming for. Both were pleased, Gina never thought her physical and mental health would be better than it was but, hey these things happen. The more they learnt, the more they grew and extended themselves. Linda was learning more about contending with the way of things in the corporate world through higher level communication and leadership techniques.

In comparing notes time and again, the pair had come to a conclusion they needed to find bigger brighter bolder role models. Linda had hit a ‘brick wall’, promises of a higher position didn’t materialise, she was told good things about her performance, knowledge and so on. But she was finally but discretely told that she was too good at her job to be readily replaced and promoted. Linda then thought it was time to move on. She sat back and relished in a cruisey week of doing the least possible but still looking like the penultimate professional.

Discussing the situation with Alice via email and then Gina at home. Alice reviewed her resume and made some solidly strategic suggestions. Gina then had one of the HR staff look at Linda’s covering letter. Between the various levels of input, she was feeling like a well oiled marketing machine.

Linda knew events and so on, but other roles she wasn’t so sure about. Gina passed on some gold level information she received at one of her in house professional development sessions on ‘Transferable skills’. It made sense. Alice agreed, she suggested she look at what was out in other industries. ‘Linda, you have been to enough trade shows, expos and so on to be able to pick out the best of the high end of town, and find roles that can match to your expectations, in income, and other aspects, like professional development.

Linda started making notes, what did she want, decent income, leadership opportunities, the chance to work with a fantastic team and more. Gina was now coming into

her own and was able to assist Linda with a range of thoughts about things happening in the corporate world.

At Karate, the Sensei talked about visualising what you want, like a high kick, how high? A solid two fisted punch? How hard. Linda recalled a convention she worked at where a business guru talked about the same thing, but in a different context. Something clicked. On the way home from training she told Gina, 'Over the years in this industry I have seen lots of fantastic speakers in a wide range of areas. There's gold in many of the things I have heard, I have a folder somewhere, where I took notes and jotted down a whole list of things they pointed out. I have that and I haven't used it!'

Gina smiled and simply whispered 'Yet.' Linda asked her to speak up, she replied, 'YET. You haven't used it yet, but you are about to, something had to trigger you to remember the material was there.' Arriving home she went looking for that folder. It had less notes in it than she remembered, but what was there was gold class material. She poured over the information and shared a few gems with Gina.

Just then there was a noise at the front of the house, on the front verandah? Linda stood, then headed to her bedroom and took a stealthy look out the window, crouched by the curtains, out onto the verandah. There was a figure there, now heading down the steps. She carefully opened the front door slightly, with one foot solidly preventing the door from flying open. No one there… She opened the door a bit wider and then heard a car start and head off. Out the door to investigate further, in case it was a food delivery to the wrong house or similar, nope, nothing. Down the steps to the street, the car she heard was a long way up the street by now. Strange? Perhaps they realised they were at the wrong address or something like that.

Coming back up the stairs she realised that the lead lighting on either side of the door had a few pieces of clear glass and it was possible to see into the house from the outside. She hadn't noticed that before. Gina was just inside holding the door open slightly, ready to rush out and support Linda the 'enforcer'. Nope, no need. Linda pointed out the clear glass, some small pieces of tape applied on the inside soon changed that view.

It was probably just a strange anomaly but who would really know. Who was at the door and why. The brief 'visit' was soon forgotten.

Linda was back to thinking about her goals, what did she want in a job and which company could provide it? Alice suggested the big end of town, ‘Forget small frys and start ups, a government department only if there are fantastic perks.’

A list was made of bigger companies, Underwoods, Fletchley and Green, a few other consulting firms, then some big manufacturing companies. Linda soon pushed those sorts of places out of the running. She wanted to be mobile, one way or another, her current role had her travelling from time to time and it would be nothing to head out and chat to suppliers across town, so she wanted to maintain that type of activity where possible.

Gina liked her thinking and the process she used to evaluate the role she wanted. Secretly she wanted something similar in some way, but how, she wasn't sure just yet.

Alice also pointed out that many roles are not advertised, in some organisations they would say ‘Who can we head hunt for this role?’ Some even just put a thought out to the universe and then *magically* a resume would come in. Other places just kept a pile of resumes and would periodically sort through them. Many would have another role already.

Linda had worked on her professional social media profile, in flipping through possible contacts one name stood out, Janey Underwood. Linda had seen her present at corporate events, savvy, street smart and incredibly articulate. She was a big knob these days at Fletchley and Green.Time to explore and find out if opportunities exist there.

A dizzying thought came over Linda, would a change like this be a real thing, a good thing, a long term thing? An ounce of fear crept in. Her Karate thinking kicked in, ‘Feel the fear and do it anyway!’ After all it’s an inquiry, not a definite thing.

Linda took a look at their website, yep some good things happening over there. Robotics was mentioned, a takeover bid for a rival company. She looked at a list of things that they did, she found a section on the site with employee wins, Janey had recently competed in a Karate competition and won at state level.

She then realised that the karate tournament she and Gina were at recently was where Janey won the title. She thought, what a coincidence!

But there was more, Janey actually went to a sister dojo to the one they went to. But it would be a while before she realised that. At a weekend inter dojo catch up, a couple of speakers, sparring with other karate zealots. A fine time was had.

In the sparring, Gina was teamed up with Janey at one point, and after a range of sessions Linda did too. Linda didn't recognise her at first, her hair was tied back and in a white karate uniform a group of blondes can look the same. The catch up finished with a few speakers with brief insights into their Karate journey. Then a small buffet and casual networking.

Janey was one of the speakers and it nearly floored Linda, to think that she got a few good shots in with a state champion earlier in the day! She nudged Gina and quietly said, Keep an eye on Janey, I don't want to miss out on networking with her. It took a while to catch up and connect, Janey was very positive and supportive. Linda commented, 'I saw you on the professional socials but thought if I could, I would rather ask permission face to face to follow you rather than just press another button.'

Janey smiled widely and said, 'Thanks, that's very sweet! That's the best thing I have heard this week, yes, connect!' That was followed by Janey being inquisitive about where Linda worked and how long had she been there? The conversation changed when another person from the organising group wanted Janey for a photo. Gina had a quick chat with Linda and said, 'So did you ask for a job?' Linda laughed. Five minutes later Linda spotted Gina chatting to Janey for a while, she thought little of it.

Chapter Seven

Linda had added Janey to her list of contacts on the professional socials and was rather pleased with herself. She mentioned to Alice that she had done so, Alice already knew of Janey and said 'Well done, welcome to the club!' Linda told Gina, she smiled and said 'Yay! Go you girl!' Linda then looked at Janey's list of contacts and saw Gina and Alice on the list. Gina just smiled and had a little giggle.

Linda then asked 'You caught up the other day with Janey after I had a chat with her. So what was discussed?' Gina smiled and said, 'Now that would be telling…' Linda was clearly intrigued. Gina finally relented and said, 'That's a no brainer girl, we discussed you. I was your *walking talking resume advocate*, nothing extreme, just a few key points to arouse her interest and paint you in a good light. Oh and I think you might need to do more than a standard cover letter, something more creative, discrete, but creative. I just have a hunch about this.'

Linda was floored, Gina seemed to know more about Janey than she did, but wait, what, how, when? She then realised that Gina was in a similar type of company so it was probably natural that she would have some level of contact or inside knowledge.

Gina added in not long after, ‘My mentor at work suggested that I make a network of contacts in our field and not just our company, and BINGO Janey showed up, but unlike you I didn’t ask permission.’

Linda’s mind then shifted to a creative approach, what to say, how to do it, what would work, what would fail… oh. What would someone like Janey like to see and or hear.

The girls went shopping the next day at Maling Road in Canterbury, a nice set of shops with loads of character and some up market options for coffee and cake. They wandered, they found a spot and sat for a while, chatting merrily away, all good. Then out of the blue Janey Underwood wandered by sunglasses on, impeccably presented. She walked by the shop, then spotted the pair in the window and waved with a wide smile. Our hapless pair waved back, Janey then entered the shop, said hello and asked if she could join in. Yes was the answer, she explained that she lived nearby. A hot drink was ordered and some cake, thank you very much, and the trio chatted as if they were long lost friends.

Linda felt so at ease with Janey, now in a more casual setting. She seemed to effortlessly spend some time with the girls. After an hour of exploring the daily goings on, and how things were in the wider world, Janey said her goodbyes and was about to head off. She stood, looked at Linda and said, 'A creative offering to give me some sort of understanding of your credentials would be nice.’ She then gave the girls a wave and headed out the door.

The pair looked at each other in amazement, wow what a gem they thought. They were soon off to check out the shops. In one of the homeware shops was a small painted cut out of a Jack Russell dog front on, it was a cute letter rack. Linda pictured her resume on DL sized cards each card represented different aspects, just like a sub heading would on a standard resume.

Linda was soon in possession of the dog, it had a cute but determined look about it. She then pondered what to put on the cards and how to create them. One for Achievements, One for skills and abilities, One for employment history and position description.

Gina liked what she saw and helped edit the contents, and overall look of the cards. Linda then looked at a range of designs for the background graphics, then had them printed on photo paper at an office supply store, then selected an envelope to fit the size. The result is a very interesting set of cards. She took them home and proudly showed them to Gina. She liked them so they must be good.

All of a sudden a thought hit Linda, 'A creative offering to give me some sort of understanding of your credentials would be nice.' Janey's voice rattled in her head. The key thing was being creative, she realised she had missed the mark and not just in a small way. The cards are just another form of resume and not that creative… oh… she looked at Gina glumly, took a big sigh and then said, 'This is all wrong.' The dog is good, tenacious and all that but how the message is presented, nah, not creative enough.'

Gina had a suggestion, 'You are an 'events' person, you have used lanyards a lot, so do many corporations. Therefore use something they know and make it work. She then discussed a qr code on a lanyard card with her name on it and then another card with another code. Each leading to a different thing, the first one led to a snappy youtube type video, a quick resume with photos that Linda had from many events, Banner type headings across the bottom of each image gave the written details and her voice and images gave more depth. The second QR code on the next lanyard card contained photos of Linda growing up, cute but poignant, these quickly led to workplace images and the statement 'What next?' It then presented a range of goals, both personal and professional.

Linda toiled hard on the computer until late that night, and well into the next day to get things right. It was back to the office supply store to print and laminate the cards with the QR codes, tested on her smart phone, both worked ok. She then thought about the lanyard strap and decided it should be a dog collar. But then, what about the letter rack at the back, should that be used too?

A print out of solid business based and goal setting quotes, made into a concertina and then attached to the back section, it turned out well and impressed Gina no end! Wrapped in clear cellophane with a bow and delivered to Fletchley and Greens front desk, first thing on Monday. Linda was relieved to have completed it and was then off to her usual work.

A text arrived on her phone at Eleven forty five. It said, 'Wow Linda, most impressive! What next?' Janey U. Linda pondered that question all afternoon, her Aunt Ellie was

consulted via text, she told her the details and then asked, what could come next? Ellie's text reply said, ‘Brainstorm, get creative, get innovative and think BIG. Let me know…’

Her thinking started with a set of Mantras.

'I aim to transform complex challenges into seamless experiences and high-value solutions.'

'Every strategic insight I share and every detail I plan aims to elevate my clients' success.'

'I calm the chaos with an assertive approach and a structured strategy, delivering positive results every time.'

'My expertise informs the vision, my coordination brings it to life, and profits generally follow naturally.'

This turned into a series of Ai generated images of Linda speaking each Mantra. In the video she had a flag she waved that said ‘Robots, the way of the future.’ knowing that Fletchley and Green were working on a major robotics project with Kai Musk and company. She thought the robotic nature of the Ai video mash up would hit the mark, Ellie added a few minor changes but the concept she felt was clever, to the point and professional. Edits made result created. She sent a link to Gina. Gina loved it.

Linda had a courier deliver a manilla envelope with large letters printed on the front, NEXT and ‘urgent’ splashed across at an angle at the bottom, Janey's details at right angles to the NEXT letters. The contents had a QR code and the statements printed out in a strong font, and then signed off, Linda Dixon. With her contact details.

Linda could sense a BIG change was coming so she applied for leave, starting one week from today. Three weeks of her annual leave. It was a quiet time for the event company so HR granted her wish with some degree of ease.

Janey sent a text, ‘Received.’ then two days later, another text. Linda: Interesting and creative, what sort of remuneration would cause you to jump ship?’ Linda suggested $85k Janey countered with $70, Linda replied with $80… things went silent, Linda wondered if she had pushed too hard. Late the next day a HR person from Fletchleys sent an email. Offer accepted, we want you to start in two weeks time at our next in-house induction, if you agree, a detailed process will follow. Reply please at your earliest convenience.

Linda was floored. She then took a look at her leave entitlements, she had a further three weeks up her sleeve. She thought about applying for it and then decided to keep that as an ace card up her sleeve.

She accepted the role. Then told Ellie and Gina, both were very excited. Gina mentioned that this could be an amazing turning point for you.

Fletchley HR sent through a list of compliance points, their commitment to employee statement, mission, vision, mantra and quality statement. Employee expectations and grounds for dismissal. Probation period of up to six months. There was then a series of online 'hoops' to jump through, things to learn, things to memorise and know off by heart, (Mandatory.) and various videos.

All of a sudden Linda stopped, there was no job description. Oh wow what an oversight… a new job but no title, no details, no anything! In amongst the documents was a contract that needed to be signed and returned asap. It didn't outline any job details. Linda was stumped, do I mention that or go in blindly, oh wow what an adventure that would be!

Gina was consulted. 'Oh, perhaps write your own job description and be ready to have it ripped up in front of you, remember, think big and be creative. You say you can problem solve and be innovative, so innovate. Shoot it over to Janey for approval. Linda was stumped again. She headed to the website for the organisation, pictured a 'sort of' role she could fit into. Spotting a minor gap in the system and a HR role that included events for clients and staff. They had a branch in Sydney so there was room for something there, surely. Best Practice job descriptions for such a role were researched, and Ai created. Linda tweaked the details, Ellie checked, as did Gina. Both gave approval. Copy emailed to Janey, she sent it to HR, they discussed it internally, HR said, Maybe, Janey said yes, let's make room and let Linda make the profits flow…

Reply, with a few minor changes. Signed off by Janey and HR. Linda had to sign and agree. Linda followed the online details and links, learnt the key mandatory points and then took her leave from the events co. She went over every detail of the F&G website and looked for all sorts of reviews from clients and staff, mostly positive with the odd sly comment about someone being nudged out, 'Not up to the task they said.' Janey sent through a strategic planning document, marked as secret.

The starting day loomed near. They started staff on a Thursday, which Linda soon learned was to allow people a chance to breathe. A full week could be a bit much for some, the aim was to ease their personal pressure.

Linda had practiced getting to the office by train and tram, it was very doable in the off peak period, the next day in peak period it was a little tougher, the train was standing room only. But it was doable, the same with the tram, standing room only. A chat with a friend in the inner northern suburbs, she said she had a good run into that part of the city. 'Drive across to my place, it's a one block walk to the tram, it's an easy run, and you won't have to pay for parking at my place.' Linda tested that run, it was *easy as*, with cross town traffic, not too bad at all.

Chapter Eight

Day one of the induction program. The foyer at F&G's had a person with a sign that read 'NEWBIES' Gather here. 'Betty' greeted each person by name, facial recognition worked a treat. Betty, counted down as each person arrived, the last person to show up was five minutes late. Betty suggested that everyone give this person a hug or a fist bump, and said 'Things happen, at F& G we recognise that, and respect that this happens, so group hug!'

Betty indicated to the group to follow, a bus had pulled up out the front and the Twenty people who assembled were each given a lanyard and a magnetic name tag, 'Before entering the bus please introduce yourself to everyone else here with a handshake or a fist bump,' Betty then invited them to form a single line and came by with a hand sanitiser pump bottle. Each person used the sanitiser, not sure of what would happen if they didn't.

Betty then advised that the bus would be taking them across town to a venue on the edge of the city, this would be the first part of their induction program. They got on the bus, as did Betty.

She stood and held on as the bus took off she then started a presentation that outlines the hoops that people had jumped through to get to this point. Forms filled out, an OHS online course and test, then the compliance to the key compliance points. The first mandatory statement they had to remember was rattled off by Betty, she then asked them all to recite it in

unison, then the second mandatory piece was recited. They all did it with some degree of amusement.

Arriving at the venue, Betty then led the crew as if they were an army platoon, marching into the facility, with a ‘Quick March’, and a whistle pulled out of a ‘pocket’ that squeaked out each step. A person inside the venue took the whistle off Betty and said, ‘Enough of that Betty, it's not the army!’ Betty dropped its head and said ‘Awe shucks I was having such fun…’ Then turned and walked away making the whistle sound at each step until it reached the door, stopped and stood on sentry duty.

The person who now had the whistle introduced themselves, Kirstie Jones, she indicated for them to form a line, with a simple hand gesture, she then went down the line and shook each person's hand, Betty was back in action with the hand sanitiser, just after Kirstie. Betty smiled at each person, if they hesitated Betty tilted her head and then said ‘Please.’ The group filed into the venue after Kristie gestured for them to do so. Then the day's induction program began.

A video about the company started, a few key points quickly explored, at one point Betty popped its head in, and waves, it caused a giggle. The person looked around as if they have not seen Betty and turns back to face the group and continue. The person then says oh and to get this far you have had to agree to a few things, here's the list. Then a very long list of fine print whizzes by on the screen. It ends with an indescribable scribble, the voiceover says, ‘And… Thanks for signing that.’ Betty’s video likeness then comes onto the screen and presents a list of things the group will cover in the induction program, from OHS test, first aid test to reciting the mandatory statements, as the ‘real’ person wanders off and finally waves to the group from a distance before disappearing out a door, Betty then covered some other points. The induction program has breaks at strategic points. It also includes strategically placed ‘getting to know’ sessions with all the participants.

The program ran over four days and included a guided tour of the main building on the third day with Betty acting as a tour guide complete with a small flag. Giving a commentary as they went through each section. Betty knew everyone's name and greeted them as such on wandering through. If there was an empty seat Betty indicated, ‘X lives here, but not right now.’

Betty was ready at every pick up and drop off and various sections of the program each day. Participants were impressed with the details and depth of the program, they met all of the

senior team who oversaw the running of F&G. Each gave a very brief outline, their name, role and experience, Betty timed each one and blew the whistle if they went too long. It was rather humorous.

Team exercises were aimed to explore creative and innovative approaches as well as communication skills, leadership and teamwork.

Team leaders were introduced from each area that participants represented, done in a similar fashion to the big guys earlier on. This time the leaders were given a bit more time to outline how they fitted into the organisation and the depth they added as a team.

On the last day of the program they were on the bus early and would spend the last hour of the day meeting the team they were part of. In the foyer Betty indicated they would be part of a group photo. That done, they were given details on where they needed to be. It was a map with a contact person. They were off to start their role at F&G. Linda was all smiles as were most of the participants.

Fifth floor, Linda did okay to find that, after all it was a simple ride in the lift. Ding, the door slid open and she stepped out. A room with the cubicles arranged in an organic fashion and a reception desk that was an L shape. The person there was all smiles, she stood, came over and shook hands. Greeting Linda by name, then out from the sea of faces seated busily working away at their cubicles came Roger. He was Linda's meet and greet person. He showed her her spot in the F&G world, and then Lilnda was greeted by a bunch of other people. There were six people who came by, all smiles, they had lanyards with names, and a photo of themselves with their name on it. These were placed on the desk for Linda to be able to learn who they were, in a short space of time. She thought that was a nice touch and fairly innovative, oh and thank goodness I don’t have to struggle to remember the names of people as well as figure out everything else.

Linda noticed a Betty type Ai Agent come past, dancing merrily between the cubicles, humming a tune. Roger pointed out where a few things were, toilets, lunch room and exits, then mentioned who the First Aid person was. He then left her in the capable hands of the Ai Agent, Gary La Voom, he giggled on saying ‘his name’ and said, ‘They wouldn’t let me use my full porn start name, but hey La Voom is at least a little funny.’

Gary was there to inform Linda on the basics of the in house software. Computer on, logged in with no hassles, software fires up and the first thing she notices is her face on the screen smiling, waving with a positive quote. Then the image dances off the screen. At the

top in the middle is a button, in solid letters it says GARY. Gary pointed to it and said, any issue with the software or other things you press that I, or a likeness of me, will be here in no time to sort things out and all questions and statements are welcome. Gary pointed out where the main things were that Linda would need to locate on the screen. Gary mentioned, 'Oh by the way, nice creative use of a dog for your application. We thought it was very well done. As was your job description.'

It was getting close to five pm, knock off time. Linda wondered if anything special would happen. Gary stopped at 4:45 waved, said see you tomorrow and skipped off into the distance singing a song of some kind that was almost like a lullaby. She sat back in her very comfortable office chair and took a deep breath. She gathered up the photos of the 'team players' with the aim of learning the names and faces. Would she take them home and flip casually through them? Steve in the cubicle beside Linda, leaned over, introduced himself and said with a smile, 'Yes you should take those home with you and learn their names, note I say should, the decision is yours, but it's highly recommended.

Linda said thanks, she was about to ask about what happens at the five pm knock off when some music came on, it was one minute to five. Linda grabbed the photos, put them in her bag, and watched as her image on the screen danced back into frame, waved and said in a discrete manner, 'Linda, it's time to piss off home!' The screen faded out, then the computer shut down.

People milled about at the reception area, letting Linda know that they got on the lift in bunches, she would be part of Bunch five. They waved to her, so she moved over to be with them. Greetings all round, Kez, part of Linda's team, told her that they did the lift groupings to make sure there was enough room in each lift, and to save the mad rush to the lift each evening. Linda said 'Wow, that's very civilised.' The group smiled and in unison said 'Welcome to Fletchley and Green.' They then briefly giggled.

Out the door and on her way home, she thought that F&G was so surreal, the Ai Agents, and heaven help you if you called them a bot! The organisation, the pleasantries and all the details, are very impressive. A crammed tram ride out to where her car was parked, then home to catch up with Gina. Linda felt like a school kid who had been on an exciting excursion and was bursting with delight.

On the way home, Linda pondered the turning point. Up to now things had been fairly straight forward, now her career and probably a big chunk of her personal life would change.

The pair ate dinner and Gina was regaled with the details of Linda's day. It was well over an hour before Gina got a word in, much to her amusement. Linda then asked her, so how was your day? Gina smiled, cleared her throat and said, 'I've decided to grow out my fringe, oh and work was okay as well!'

Chapter Nine

Linda settled in fine to her new position and had learnt the names and faces of her team, she had spent time in the front reception area on her floor with an early start watching people wander in to start their day. She greeted people she could recognise with a cheery hello, they waved and said hello back. Linda was intrigued with all the waving? It seemed to be a universal F&G thing.

Gary the AI Agent came by, waved, said hello and added, 'Yes we wave a lot, it's universal for hello and is generally positive unless you do an illegal wave, then that's not positive, so we don't do that. Oh look here comes Mary, Gary waved, as did Mary bidding Linda a good morning as she went by. Gary then bowed to Linda and said, 'If you need me just pump that button!' Then wandered off.

Linda's team had all arrived, she got most of the names right. Now at her computer ready to log in, button pressed and presto, there she was on the screen, waving hello to her. Linda soon noticed that other people were waving at their 'alter ego' on the screen, so she did the same. The main screen had an area like a search enquiry, it had a P in a circle, she asked Steve, he said, 'That's a great starting point for each day, glad you spotted it early. It's P for Prompt. If you write in it, where do I start? It will take you on the best journey of your life!'

She did as suggested, on the screen a table of tasks presented itself and who to chat to. Then there was a button for each task that said 'more info' click, and details showed up, documents relating to the task, suggested timeline for actions and lots more. The first task was, meet the team and not just briefly. It suggested who to chat to first and a list of questions she could ask.

Steve put his head around Linda's corner and asked, 'Have you downloaded the F&G app yet? Because you will find life will be pretty dull without it…' She had done that, but not yet used it. When started, whatever task she was undertaking, the app would be her lifeline to the main details. She wandered over to chat to Helen, one of her team, the app recognised that

Linda was doing so, based on a map and GPS monitoring, Helen got a beep on her computer that Linda was coming over, she was then ready to take full notice of what Linda wanted to know. Linda thought, what a system!

Helen and Linda chatted, Helen pointing out the questions on the App, and said other questions were welcome as well. Linda went from team member to team member, the app showed a picture of the person and their name as she got close to them, Laurie, was next, he pointed out that the app didn't always do that, but for the intro exercise it was programmed to do that, show the picture and name.

Linda was given a heads up, along the way, that Cassie, part of her team had aimed to be in Linda's role and, 'Was a bit put out that she didn't get the role.' Linda noted her slightly abrupt response when they chatted, and remained professional, not wanting to read much into her attitude, just yet… Linda figured it might take some time to get Cassie on side, and to keep an eye on her along the way, the last thing she wanted was to have a person with a tricky attitude messing things up.

Linda had been around her team and was delighted to find out all manner of things, projects they worked on, new projects coming up, some personal details and the list went on. Back at her computer it had already ticked off the people she had chatted to on the checklist of what to do for this task. It was a case of what next?

The computer said, Catch up with Janey, the time was five minutes away for the catch up. The place, her floor, level 8. Linda grabbed her phone and was off, her computer sounded an alarm, she went back to it, the screen was flashing red and white. She sat for a moment, wiggled the mouse and it then had a message. 'You need to tick the box!' she clicked on the box that said, Yes and then headed off. Gary was by the lift. I bet you're learning a lot, hey Linda! A wry smile appeared on Gary's face.

Janey was ready at level 8, a fist bump and a cup of hot chocolate, she wanted to catch up and find out what Linda thought of everything so far. 'Amazing' was her reply followed by a rundown of each incredible moment, from Betty to Gary and every step in between. Janey sat back smiling and indicated with a nod that everything was good. 'Glad to hear that it's been good so far., you soon get used to Gary and the other Ai Agents, they're incredibly helpful and actually run this place more than anyone really knows, but hey that happens.

Oh one thing Gary will point out, and I like to get in before Gary… is the sideline. You will probably recall that it was mentioned at the induction. You pick a sideline interest and

become part of that team, the aim to make that sideline activity work really well. You will find the button on your main screen, and for someone heading up the ‘ladder’ there could be an expectation of either a new sideline or a strong input into an existing sideline. Before you take a look at the list of sidelines, think about what sort of a project or activity you would want to put some energy into. And no, I won't give you any hints.’

Linda pondered how much freedom her new role had, especially in comparison to other roles she had in the past. With all her discussions with Gina, about being female, having strength, respect, responsibility and freedom, and what that may really mean, well, now this place and role was starting to show itself as providing all of those things and more. A solid turning point was starting to show itself.

Linda’s mind was ticking over some more, she desperately wanted to look up the ‘sideline’ list, but then again, would that go against her somehow? Meeting over, she was soon back at her spot. Steve was elsewhere and the person on the other side of her spot wasn’t there either, Gary wandered off to somewhere so she opened the computer and looked at the screen, then decided to go to the company website and see if any of the sideline activities were listed, nope. Linda then thought she should have looked that up from her phone, so as not to be tracked, but would that be an issue?

Gary turned up. ‘Yo ho ho, Linda!’ She asked him what he knew about the sideline activities, he smiled, and responded with ‘Apart from everything, I know nothing.’ Gary then ran through the list of sideline activities, from humorous or casual to serious and a few things in between.

From wine appreciation to encouraging active standpoints in educational dogma for corporations. One stood out from the list, Beyond an Understanding of Domestic Abuse. She asked Gary for an outline or synopsis. Gary indicated a group of nine people were part of that group, the aim was to go beyond just appreciating the challenge we face as a society, and provide actions to improve things. ‘Oh and they call it the Beyond Group.’

Linda asked if they had taken into account Germaine Greer's views on the female roles and or exploring how to make change based on those views? Yes, was the response, ‘And what about assimilationist equality?’

‘Yep that too, although not from a heavy academic viewpoint, just a more casual or practical view point. They are in the throes of creating some material to release to the public about how men and women can learn to be positive from the beginning of a relationship and

how to stop bad approaches from happening. It's based around the book 'Resilient Relationships' By Steve Gray, however it would appear that there are people in the group who have been in abusive situations with people, and are probably hoping to just get some form of positive therapy from being part of the group. Then there's one team member who is an old school feminist, and probably the key thing preventing the Beyond group from doing big things, a pity really. Anyway, any other questions?' Linda said No and Gary wandered off.

Linda was intrigued and talked to the computer. Okay, sign me up for the Beyond group, it chimed and said 'Done.' Linda was surprised. Steve was back at his spot, said hi and mentioned that although the computer can do that voice thing, people rarely used it unless they were in an isolation pod, otherwise lots of people know what you're up to. Linda said, 'Aha.' He then pointed out the button on the screen to press to ensure it didn't listen to everything.

Her computer chimed in with another thing to add to her checklist and calendar. It suggested that she catch up on the previous meetings of the Beyond group, there were a bunch of links. The system had created a simple Ai video of what the group was about, who the members were and some of their input. It ran for ten minutes, Linda was thinking that she should get on with 'real work' but persevered.

When the video finished, she then went back to the main screen. It suggested to her to catch up with Chloe about the Event Implementation Project. Or EIP for short. Linda wandered off to find her. Chloe suggested a mid sized pod so they could chat more discreetly. She showed Linda the pod, a glass walled room on two sides, with a table and four chairs, there was a bigger pod right next to this one.

Chloe outlined that there were challenges she wanted to mention, but others in the EIP didn't see them as being a big thing, but to Chloe they were. Linda thought she might be the type of person who agonised over small details. She soon discovered that this wasn't the case and the issues were quite real. Linda asked if Chloe thought that some people on the team didn't really want to be there?

'Oh, that's a strong question, but um, ergh, perhaps that could be a thing.'

'Do you know what the benefits are of the EIP group?'

'Benefits?'

‘Yep, the positive resultant activities or outcomes from implementing the information or details we work on.’

Chole opened a document on her laptop, did a quick search, and then said ‘Hey Ai, create a list of benefits from the attached document.’ A list was created and Chloe said, ‘Yes I can tell you the benefits, that’s interesting I hadn’t fully thought of that before. Yeah that’s a useful list.’ I think we should spread the word at this point before we move on to anything else in this project, it might weed out a few people.’ She then sent the points to Linda. Meeting over.

Linda ‘buttoned’ Gary, ‘How do I send this list to the EIP group?’ Gary showed her and was soon gone. Linda wrote a note with the list. To give a brief explanation for the group. She then went person to person in the group to have a quick chat about the benefits. Some had questions to clarify things, most just sat and listened and gave a cursory affirmative nod and a smile.

Linda then checked out the rest of the project for the EIP, a checklist, a few guiding principles and a list of possible events. Corporate ‘stuff’ the aim being to engage clients in events that could make them better in business, add to profits and all that.

She then flicked AI open and gave a prompt to create an outline of where things were at so far and where things could be. The list showed a few points for expansion. She then sent the list to the group as a message, with the heading ‘Inviting you to pick a task and make it happen.’ Half an hour later she had three tasks out of five taken up. Chloe was one of the first to take a task. Linda then sent a note regarding the other two, ‘Invitation over, here are the last two things to be dealt with. Pick one.’ After lunch she had people fitted against each task.

Back to the system, what’s next on the list. ‘Review mandatory statements.’ Click, the statements showed up on the screen. Reviewed and repeated five times each. Complete with soothing music to hopefully aid retention. Then a meeting on level three. Compliance and Enforcement. Linda walked into a meeting with fifteen people she didn’t know, they welcomed her readily, and slid her a copy of the agenda. Linda listened carefully, took some notes and highlighted points to explore and find out more about.

Back at her desk, the day was disappearing quickly. She looked up the highlighted points and made notes. Things were starting to make sense.

On the way home, Linda remembered a checklist she had for implementing events back on her other business system, she logged on from home and downloaded a bunch of checklists and forms she felt were of value. She then altered all the inclusions of the old company contacts, links etc to the F&G logo, she then had Ai check the documents against F&G protocols and procedures. A few changes were suggested.

Gina arrived home, a late session at work had held her up. There was some mad chatter about their day and all the details therein. Gina was amazed at the operating system F&G had, compared to Appleby and Johnson they seemed rather archaic in their approach. Nigel had sent a text earlier in the day. 'I know where you live, it's time to chat.' Gina didn't mention the text from Nigel until well after what happened next.

There was a bang at the front door, the girls weren't used to someone knocking on their door, they were both momentarily bewildered by it. Linda headed to the door, it was a delivery driver, wrong address, the address is over the road. The driver was apologetic and was on his way.

The girls chatted, prepared food and started eating. Another knock at the door at the end of their meal. Linda headed down the hallway. She opened the door expecting another delivery driver. Instead a darkly clad person with a hoodie top stood in the shadow of the front verandah light. Linda said 'hello', the figure was a person slightly shorter than Linda, a male voice said, 'Oh, Is Gina here?' Gina knew the voice straight away, it was Nigel. Linda then said, Who's asking?

Gina was halfway down the hallway at this point. And sheepishly said, 'Nigel? You're not meant to be within fifty metres of me, the court order says so.' Nigel just looked past Linda and menacingly stared silently at Gina. Linda then pulled the front door closed enough to block most of his view. Nigel then growled in a deep menacing voice, 'I don't know who you are but you don't want to be involved in this, it will end up making things worse.'

Linda remained silent, Gina kept her distance. Nigel started at Linda. Then tried to manoeuvre to see Gina, the door closed some more. Linda then chimed in with, 'You know you are not meant to be here, I'm inviting you to leave and not come back. That should be clear.' Gina used Linda's name in her next statement, 'Linda, I'm calling the police!' Nigel looked up and said, 'Linda, nice name, it would be a pity to spoil that.' Linda was now incensed that someone had made a menacing remark at her. She slowly shook her head three times, then smartly opened the door, rushed out at Nigel and caught him unawares, then with

a mighty push, Nigel crashed down the front steps, reaching out with one hand, he caught the hand rail and awkwardly steadied himself.

He then straightened himself on the stairs and yelled, ‘You will regret going against me bitch!’ He started up the steps and with one mighty kick Linda planted her right foot into his sternum, he landed awkwardly. Gina was now on the phone to her father, then called the police, she was soon out on the verandah. Meanwhile Linda had headed down the stairs and was face to face with Nigel who struggled to his feet and now pulled out a knife, Linda soon kicked that high into the air and threw a few punches and pulled off an awesome kick that collected with the side of Nigel's face, he staggered and came running back at her.

She landed a side kick that collected him in the ribs. There was a ‘crack’ sound. He winced, she then stood back in a relaxed posture and said quietly, ‘You now have some cracked ribs, and you now realise that I can, and WILL defend myself and others. Don’t be so stupid as to EVER think of coming here again.’

Nigel turned wearily heading for the gate and said ‘I will get you bitch!’ He turned and gingerly walked away. Linda followed quickly behind him and landed a kick to his right calf from behind, he fell grabbing his leg, ‘BITCH.’ he called out. One of the neighbours was now out the front of their house watching, having heard the commotion. Linda stood over Nigel and added, Your threats are duly noted, I can, and will find you if I need to, and I will make things much worse if I want to, or need to. You have displayed stupid behaviour so far and if I need to I will hit you until that behaviour is gone, one way or another.’

The neighbour was now across the street. It was about ten more minutes before the police arrived, Nigel couldn’t do much, his calf muscle ‘adjusted’ enough to prevent him from getting up without pain.

Linda pulled out her phone and started to record an account of what took place and what was said at what time. Gina was now by her side, noting that Nigel was wincing in pain and couldn’t go anywhere. All at once she wanted to feel sorry for him, and then glad that something had stopped him in his tracks. Who knows what he could have done after he knocked at the door, if he hadn’t been stopped.

The police took details, noting that Nigel had breached the court order and under the recent updates to the domestic abuse laws he had breached the guidelines. It was noted that he had a weapon, the knife, and took him into custody, Linda then sent them a copy of her notes. The neighbour loosely confirmed the timing. The neighbour was terrified and said,

‘What if he comes back!?’ Linda added, 'Well, we can’t know if that will or will not happen, and if it does we have to evaluate things then, we can guess all we like but it’s only when the *real thing* happens, will we know what to do.’

The Police suggested that although they could take the current view that Linda did what she did out of self defence, they would probably have to question her further about her actions, Nigel may well tackle you on being so aggressive. Mind you we can’t say we like what you did, but… we liked what you did… The office nodded and headed off.

Gina's father arrived as the police headed off. Gina introduced Graham to Linda and then filled him in on what had happened. He said he was grateful that Linda was there to take solid action and that she had the skills to handle things the way she did. Linda smiled and said, ‘The rib cracking sound was rather awesome… I think he will get the message.’

Nigel wasn’t seen for a few weeks, his disconnected calf muscle prevented him from doing a range of things, he had a friend collect his car from out the front of Gina’s house the next day.

Linda mentioned to Gina, ‘You called the police, I get that, but why your father?’ Gina thought for a moment. Then said, ‘He said to call him at any stage about things to do with Nigel, that’s one thing, then I guess there's the thought that he has protected me in times of need.’ Linda thought to herself, ‘Well I had neutralised the guy, the police yes, but her dad as well? Hmm fascinating…’

Gina added, ‘I made the decision to phone others by myself, based on the information available, I called dad first, because the police can take a while to get to things. Then the police, obviously.’ Linda agreed but then mentioned ‘Well I guess I hadn’t finished with Nigel at that stage, so you wouldn’t have known if he was out of action at that stage, so that makes sense.’

Linda started to wonder, ‘Did I protect Gina, or did I enjoy having the power to disrupt Nigel? She was stuck in a conundrum, what if I had done things differently, what might have happened? This was something that would enter her mind from time to time, it became a cross between an enigma and a dilemma. To hit or not to hit? She had done enough karate to know, there were times when you hit the aggressor, before they hit you. It’s about your survival.

Gina had seen first hand, *self defence* in action. Some words, perhaps not enough words, but things did escalate quickly. Then action, she marvelled at Linda's direct physical approach and how it sent a clear message. She wondered if she could have done the same if she had been in Linda's position?

Chapter Ten

The pair now had an interesting story to share with the Karate group. There was some discussion about how far Linda went and what was necessary, then some said, the only way to be sure he wouldn't come back would have been some form of crippling attack and she did just that. Some supported the actions some didn't. A moral dilemma formed and over time the subject would come up and a wider discussion would be had.

At the end of the class a few of the attendees said well done to Linda, and although there were moral issues, if you give them something to remember, then that should be the end of it. All good and well to defend, but it may give them room mentally and physically to come back. One thought that arose from a female attendee, 'By attacking the attacker, aren't you enabling women to take a violent stance against men?' Linda's response was, 'If that happens en masse, then I will have achieved something wonderful, but I doubt it. Too many women have been set up to behave as princesses and they are often not in a position to *push back* when the situation needs it.'

Another comment came quietly in, 'Perhaps you should have used a calm and assertive approach?' Linda's response, 'The guy had a knife… I figured, from my personal experiences over a number of interactions with people, that something physically direct needed to happen. I started out calm, and then I got assertive fast, caught him off guard… FAST!' The discussion soon stopped after that.

Gina was pleased that something happened, seeing that Nigel had overstepped his court order, but she was not sure if he was going to do something else that was stupid. The next level of stupidity, might well be, really stupid. There had been a mix of cases over time she had seen in the media, or had been told about.

Linda's Beyond group had notes relating to threats from perpetrators of abuse. It was a lot more common than people might expect. Therefore the abused would live in fear, not

knowing if an abuser would return at some stage to do damage, because they wanted to have power and control over someone, even if they ‘did time.’ In prison.

Gina more clearly saw the benefit of self defence, Linda pointed out that she went a ‘bit further, than just self defence, but let’s not make a big thing about that, ‘As far as I was concerned he had overstepped the boundaries and needed to be taught a lesson.’ Gina then added, ‘And to think that I once loved the guy!’

The Police called to chat to Linda, Nigel had admitted to having the knife and drawing it. So her case for self defence was justified. Therefore there is no further action.

The next night after work, the pair had a discussion about what had taken place with Nigel. There were starting points to abuse, types of abuse and details about why people like Nigel want power and control over people. It’s a complex issue and needs to be dealt with but how? Linda suggested educating people to not want power and control. Gina suggested the victims needed to get out of the relationship earlier and seek support. Linda pointed out that her research showed there wasn’t enough support available, even if people needed to get out of a tough situation. Then there was mention of the statistics, too many people were dying each week at the hands of their abuser.

The discussion turned to gender neutrality and how many people who had been ‘groomed’ by their parents and society in general to act and look certain ways. Girls with long hair, bows and cute outfits ‘princesses’, then boys with short hair and practical outfits, boys will be boys. Then apart from how they looked, it affected the way they acted. Linda recalled a two part documentary set in England that looked at these issues. ‘We set people up to do things in certain ways and for instance, take you Gina, it will take you longer to develop solid karate skills than someone who is stronger. For me I fell off my bike, fell out of trees, punched boys in the school yard and got punched back. I was very much the tomboy I am used to being hit, either accidently or on purpose.’

Gina agreed, ‘We seem to be trapped in pre-set values and beliefs about what each gender should do, and then the workplaces that exploit their insecurities and or ability to hold on to old ways and how we conform.

I also have a fear for the future of motherhood, observing how society exploits maternal love, demanding endless work hours, domestic duties, and emotional labor while being offered low level support and zero financial recognition. These days there are talks about females being paid less than males and that they should be remunerated better to make up the

difference in earning levels. But that's probably not likely. Therefore people will probably cut way back on having kids.'

Linda pointed out that the overarching aspect to all of this is a search for freedom. It's exhausting trying to obtain it. 'Though I have a tough exterior and have learnt a lot along the way, I'm not even sure that I know what freedom actually looks or feels like. I can defend myself physically as well as mentally, to some degree, but the notion of freedom, is it free from financial obligation or what?'

The discussion goes back and forth. They stumble across the notion that they may be suffering from a form of stunted growth., being held back by societal expectations simply because they are women. They reflect that this is probably what Germaine Greer is talking about in her writings and trying to come to a conclusion about what the ideal concept could be. But noting that individuals might want different things.

Gina ponders, 'What if freedom means something like 'uninhibited growth.' There was some silence as they thought about that. Gina then added, 'I must admit I have issues about anxiety and at one point depression, possibly some form of post partum depression. But the whole motherhood thing was a rather challenging situation to deal with. The anxiety created can certainly hold a person back

Lets face it we have had different upbringings and it leads us in different directions and gives us diverse concepts to explore, trying to come to terms about what life is all about, and creating meaning that works for us.'

Linda nodded agreement. 'Yep we both have insecurities created by our different upbringings, I got to climb trees and ride bikes with the boys, You got to catch the train to school and have access to a range of other activities and a bunch of other friends. Society has systematically weaponised our respective situations perhaps with the aim of keeping our opinions of our own status low? Look, it may not be aimed at doing that, so perhaps our own thinking is what holds us back. Our own beliefs and values that we compare to others that then form our views, so perhaps we are already free, already less anxious but don't believe it yet?'

'Well what I'm now thinking is that we are forming a sense of solidarity here, not as a vague concept or thing but as a functional reality. For instance, we are both exploring how to protect ourselves physically and then hopefully mentally, emotionally as well. Perhaps for you it's your new job, your new approaches to thinking, using Ai differently. Then for me it

started with the new wardrobe and hairstyle and could lead on to things at work that may allow me to find new avenues for growth.'

Linda nodded agreement, 'So we are in a unique position to support each other in a form of sisterhood, an experience of creating mutual elevation. Perhaps we start off in a vulnerable position and then seek to create a stronger stance. In our case finding strengths and still holding on to our feminine positions, so we don't have to act like men just because we are in a more male dominated world.

Let's be independent, strong, occasionally vulnerable until we find a stronger way forward. We are both very worthy in the positions we hold and then even more so as we step into higher roles. Be guilt free, be anxiety free, strong and deliberate, creative and the author of our own lives. Become more resilient, become more positive and capable.'

Linda realised at that point that she should quit from her role at the event company. She used up the last of her leave and then tendered her resignation letter within the two weeks notice period required. They rang, and pestered her to reconsider, they even offered a decent wage rise, however that paled into insignificance with what she had already achieved at F&G. They invited her to a farewell get together, she accepted and made it fit with picking up her personal belongings. She had been missed and that would continue to be so, said one of the managers at the event co.

Chapter Eleven

Work rolled on for Linda, but for Gina, a quiet awakening was taking place. The conceptual frameworks she was picking up weren't just abstract tools, they were lenses revealing the machinery of work, freedom, and personal growth. With her rising confidence and clearing anxiety, a crucial question began to anchor itself in her mind: *What more can I actually achieve here, and is this workplace capable of giving me what I want?*

Her observation of office dynamics sharpened. She began tracking the quiet, theatrical manipulation run by the established male network. Strategic meetings were routinely-stacked with extra men, colleagues who had no functional stake in the agenda, but whose presence lent weight and artificial consensus to key decisions. *We live in a democracy, and majority rules,* Gina would think with a trace of bitter amusement, realising only later that the numbers

were systematically engineered. The amount of times she saw this was infuriating, she was gathering more internal strength and was looking for ways to make ‘better things happen.’

In a discrete discussion with a colleague about the level of male domination, she indicated that, ‘It’s been in place for a long time, not much changes around here’. Gina thought, ‘don’t get mad, get even.’ Gina then explored where her approaches had advanced her position, personally and professionally.

Gina’s ‘footprint’ was expanding. A refreshed personal presentation combined with a new comfort in her professional skin made her visible. Coupled with her ongoing in-house training, real opportunities began to surface. Her former general admin role transformed into supervising a small team and leading onboarding inductions for new entry-level cohorts.

That bridge into onboarding opened direct access to HR’s internal policy architecture. Seizing the opening, Gina subtly introduced 'Best Practice' guidelines under the guise of operational efficiency. Seeing her quiet tweaks bear real fruit gave her an intoxicating surge of agency. She began pushing the system back. When certain controlling managers violated company guidelines, she leveraged HR complaint channels and the company’s internal whistleblower program to call them out with exact compliance references.

It didn't take long for Gina to spot a critical vulnerability in the whistleblower portal. While designed to be secure, it only validated whether an inquiry originated from a valid internal domain, it didn't perform true identity checks. Realising she could spoof internal headers to submit anonymous statements on employee conduct, she unlocked a silent leverage point over the workplace environment.

Her efforts gained powerful support when she aligned with Marlene, an in-house IT technician whose technical intellect far exceeded her job description. Disgruntled after being repeatedly sidelined by the same padded meeting rooms and male-heavy blockades, Marlene was ready for a creative stance. Together, they formed an unwritten alliance with a dual objective: encourage and or force structural gender equity into the culture, and drag the organisation kicking and screaming into the AI age.

While Gina worked the human element, Marlene manipulated the infrastructure. Unbeknownst to even Gina, Marlene deployed an autonomous AI agent into HR’s administrative workflow. Under the cover of routine annual reviews, the agent quietly

adjusted compensation tables, pushing through targeted pay raises for overlooked, deserving staff.

Meanwhile, Gina's visible initiative caught the attention of an internal advocate in HR eager to promote corporate learning programs. The executive buy-in grew, even as a brief dip in productive billable hours occurred while employees spent time in training modules. For a long while, leadership simply let the conundrum slide, the optical win of 'employee development' outweighed the short-term productivity drop.

Capitalising on the momentum, Gina began quietly amending HR policy documentation. She slipped in forward-thinking strategies centered on innovation, agility, and creative workflow, citing industry standards and framing their firm, *F&G*, as a premier blueprint for modern corporate governance. Guided by her own AI prompts, she discovered historical policy templates to adapt. Only one eagle-eyed reviewer ever noticed the subtle shifts in language, but because the updates carried the standard internal formatting, they were accepted as official doctrine.

The strategy escalated when a key finance director abruptly resigned. Sensing a vacuum, Gina updated a long-neglected draft policy regarding corporate investment strategies, one that required seemingly unallocated profits to be funneled into higher-yield growth vehicles. When the incoming replacement started, they received the policy as mandatory reading with clear instructions to enact it post-haste.

Gina felt a profound sense of liberation as these strategic maneuvers took hold. The hidden leverage wasn't just satisfying, it felt like a net positive for the company's future.

The turning point came in the boardroom. A newly 'resurfaced' foundational document, exposed via an anonymous, domain-authenticated submission from the whistleblower system, required that voting participants in project approvals possess a direct operational connection to the agenda. Overnight, the usual political block-voting evaporated. Meetings routinely failed to reach a quorum under the old structure, forcing leadership to adopt a far more balanced, cross-departmental voting approach.

Up in the executive chambers, leadership scrambled to comply, anxious that failing to follow their own newly highlighted guidelines could lead to regulatory or legal exposure.

'Well,' a senior manager noted in a tense HR briefing, breathing a sigh of relief. 'Thank goodness for the whistleblower program. At least we know the internal checks and balances are working.'

Gina was getting away with things, causing positive results to happen in a more effective way, while quietly exploring change; few people knew that she was a'change agent'. Those who did know kept quiet, knowing that the subtle changes were for the good, and created a far more balanced approach.

Gina thought that it was interesting, how seeing 'unbalanced' things happen in the early phase of working at Appleby's was such a driver or motivator to her figuring out how to get around the inequity in the system. What she liked most was that the company trained her how to make things work better, some best practice principles, some ways to negotiate things, and oh so much more. Add to that Linda's expertise and insights with the karate training that made her see that there were other approaches to situations. Although the changes were getting good, the company was well behind the strides that the team at F&G were making with robotics and Ai.

Gina feels naughty, but manages to put the organisation into a more competitive innovative space, with employee retention on the rise. She and Linda compared notes on a range of issues. Gina is now thinking that a move to a more progressive company would be useful, personally and professionally.

Gina feels strange about all she has been able to achieve at Appleby's, but is rather satisfied with the inroads she has made to alter the status quo within a male dominated workplace. The strange sensation soon turns to a more positive outlook, using stealthy techniques to create positive change. Gone are the stacked meeting groups, more innovation is taking place, more in house training is happening, so it's all good.

An audit of the systems at Appleby and Co indicates some strange structural issues, someone at the top smells a rat, and wants answers. There's a rumor of an internal enquiry, people in leadership roles scramble to assess their systems, policies and procedures, The push to Best Practice methods, procedures etc seems to all be legitimate. The paper trail is now hard to follow with people unsure of how far back these structural issues go, and anyway the result is a better bottom line, better share of profits and good wages and conditions.

The union steps in on hearing rumbles in the system and has a look at terms and conditions as a matter of urgency, they have nothing but praise as all staff are on higher than average wages with good conditions and on the job, inhouse training. It can see the best practice principles taking shape and gives the organisation a ‘gold star rating’. The rumblings soon settled, but somehow the system changed itself? Is that possible? Things went quiet for a while.

There’s discussion between Linda and Gina about how things have gone, Gina is now primed to move on and a number of organisations at the ‘high end’ of town are explored for what they can provide. Underwood's consulting shows up as a place of similar merit to F&G. Gina notes she has not used up any leave and has five weeks to draw upon. Linda told her how she used her leave to try out at F&G and how that worked out, ‘Just fine…’

Gina then explored opportunities at Underwoods, their website indicating a fresh approach to job applications, they listed a range of ‘departments’, and then spelled out a one page creative expression of interest in a particular department as their starting point. There are no guarantees that a role would be available.

Gina starts to think about how she could do that, apply in a creative manner, and for which department? There was a lot to explore, she recalled the effort that Linda went to for her role. In the meantime it was all about keeping the status quo for Gina. Happy that she now had a fresh goal and could keep things humming along where she was. HR contacted her, she had a chunk of leave that she could use up, five weeks worth. She decided to take three weeks in the next school holidays so she could spend time with Christine.

Linda gets a message from Janey, ‘Having a catch up this Sunday, now that it’s late spring, a small group of girls, a bit of time on the boat. Interested?’ Linda liked the idea and said yes. In fact she was floored by the idea and couldn’t wait. Details came through on Friday, the Marina details, time and what to wear, ‘boat shoes, shoes that don’t mark a deck.’

Saturday, Gina had been to visit Christine, Linda got a text message, ‘One of the girls has pulled out, room for one more, any suggestions?’ She asked Gina, she was a little unsure but relented and said ‘oh yeah why not.’

‘My friend Gina’s willing, is that okay?’

‘Yep, hey how about I pick you guys up from your house, it saves taking two cars.’

‘Yep that sounds fine.’

The pair had no idea what to expect. The weather forecast was for a warm day with plenty of sunshine.

Chapter Twelve

Janey pulled up in her EV Range Rover the girls were ready, not at all sure what the day would provide. Well they were in for a treat. Neither knew what to expect, Janey just said that the boat used to belong to Allen, her late brother in law and the boat would just sit there, so she got her marine licence and has enjoyed life on the bay ever since.

The hapless pair were picturing a boat that maybe had a canvas cockpit cover, some seats or maybe one of those boats that have seating in the front and back like a barbeque boat, loosely put they had no idea. Janey mentioned she had arranged for the boat to be in position ready for them. They were curious, but neither knew much about boats, and Marina protocols. Both were happy to have a day out that was different from their norm.

Parking at the Marina was tight, but happened. Janey was greeted by a smartly presented staff member at the Marina, ready to assist with anything that needed to be carried etc.

A large hamper was retrieved from the rear of the vehicle. They headed off through the Marina main office and headed for the dock. Linda and Gina almost collapsed when Janey turned at the huge boat moored at the Jetty. Linda shrieked, ‘Wow, this is HUGE!’ Janey had a laugh. They got set up and waited for the other to arrive. Janey showed the girls about the boat and explained how it was part of the Underwoods group assets, Allen had it provided as a bonus one year, he didn’t need the cash, so the asset for the company happened. The other girls arrived, Marie and Denise from accounts. Introductions all round and looks of awe for the boat itself.

An Ai Agent arrives, Janey introduces Mos, who will Captain the boat once out of the harbour. Janey indicates that Mos is well trained, knows the boat better than anyone and can give us a rundown on the details. Mos then nodded and gave a rundown of the boat, year of manufacturer, engine capacity, number of berths, and other features. Mos then started the boat and got the engine warmed up.

Janey pointed out that the marina staff didn't like a bot being in control of the boat in the marina, so she had to get the boat steered in the right direction. The marina staff casted off and they were away, Janey at the helm.

The girls had various viewpoints on the boat as they headed out, across the open bay and big ships, then across to the shore and big houses at Hampton, Sandringham and further. Janey knew that a new group on the boat wanted to see all the sights and would be in awe for a little while at least. Mos soon took over and headed further down the coast.

Janey cracked open the hamper and served up the goods on offer. Some bubbly wine, a platter of cheese and crackers then tapas finger foods. The group chuckled, chatted and shared various stories of things they had done, places they had been and so on. Although Gina was the odd one out, she didn't feel that way, people included her, and were interested in how things were at Appleby's. Then fascinated by her brief stories about Domestic Abuse.

The discussion went on, and a few more wines were had. Mos pointed out various points of interest along the way and the sunshine was readily soaked up. The discussion turned to future projects and objectives. Linda mentioned that Gina was looking for a career change. Gina then said, I looked at the application process for another Company, Underwoods consulting, Janey then cleared her throat and said, 'That's my husbands mob, nah, don't go with them, come over the progressive company F&G!' There was a cheer and glass held aloft. She continued, 'Shoot me an email with something creative, you saw what Linda did, make it happen, we'll find a spot. It'll be the best thing you've done since childbirth!' The girls had a laugh. Marie and Denise smiled, had a laugh and said 'Welcome to the team!'

Gina didn't quite know if Janey was for real or if it was the drinks talking, but her head was now buzzing and exploring creative ideas., she felt overjoyed with delight.

Mos then caught the attention of the 'giggly crew' 'Attention ladies, we are currently very close to 38°16′45″S, 144°42′55″E. The position of Pope's eye, a location of a ring of bluestone rocks, was meant to be a fort to defend against a Russian attack but it was never completed.' Mos then gave a brief history lesson as he steered the boat around the location, pointing out seals and a pod of dolphins of the starboard bow as well.

The journey back dodged a few smaller boats and marvelled at the scale of container ships. A good time was had all round. Janey stood at the helm as the boat approached the marina, radioed ahead to have attendants at the ready. Although Janey was at the helm Mos

was still steering the boat, until the last minute, then Janey took over as Mos headed out to throw a line to the attendant.

On arriving home, Janey dropped off Linda and Gina, Gina asked if Janey was serious about her applying for a position at F&G? 'Yes was the response. 'Give it a go, what have you got to lose? More to the point, what have you got to gain? Everything.'

Gina, all of a sudden had an idea, a comic strip which outlined her achievements, qualifications and in house courses, coupled with her aspirations. The thing that took the longest was compiling things into some semblance of chronological sequence. Ai did the rest. Four rows of comical images aimed to amuse but clearly inform. It didn't take long, and only needed a few tweaks along the way. Linda gave an approving nod and liked the approach, she said 'You know it would be kind of strange to both be in the same place working, I guess it depends on the department and all that but I must admit, so far it's been a very interesting place to hang out. Hey, don't forget your job description!'

Gina was then stumped for a while, job description… What do I really want? She then looked over her achievements, both legal and the not so well known stealth induced achievements. Hmm that could be a job title, Stealth Master. Hm perhaps that's a bit forward, Stealth Auditor? Or Stealth adjudicator? Ah, Learning Architect - that could be useful… But I'm not really in the HR area , well not yet. So if I was, what would I be wanting to do? Train others, recruit others, be an innovation pioneer? A cage rattler? A team leader? Wait, what's my current title, Admin Coordinator, but my 'hidden' title would be more like, a disruptor… Next-Gen Initiatives Disruptor, Next-Gen Initiatives Coordinator, Disruptive coordinator.

That fitted Gina the best she thought, an Initiatives Coordinator… But what If I can't do that, what if my skills don't really allow me to do that? What if my whole thinking around this is too pretentious, what if I'm not good enough? Gina was stumped. The thoughts continued… 'What if I don't know enough about innovation, or leading a team, or being creative? Perhaps that should be my focus, to build up those skills. Or what if I took a lower role and worked my way up to a higher role, do things, earn, learn and push some buttons. Perhaps I should take a deeper look at what they do, find out some internal initiatives and, well, go from there, but who would give me that info… oh wait… she smiled and had a giggle then called out. 'Hey Linda!'

Website checked, internal strategies explored, current organisational goals rummaged… Gina was now seeing a clearer picture of what she wanted, or could get into. Linda reminded

her about the notion of using her leave up and perhaps she could explore innovation and creativity in that time frame as well as leaving her other job open. Gina chimed in with a quote from Helen Keller, ‘Life is either a daring adventure or nothing!’ ‘Girl, I’m clear on doing this, so IF I burn a bridge in jumping ship from Appleby’s then so be it.

Linda liked the bravery displayed, but also thought, ‘Well what if she doesn’t like F&G’s?’ She then had a chuckle to herself, who wouldn’t like a positive progressive company with intriguing things happening all over the place.

Linda provided some internal insights, things an outsider wouldn’t pick up from the website. ‘Think in terms of being Thriven, drive, motivation, but say thriven instead, then mention innovation and people and reluctance to innovate, so perhaps state a possible problem and a solution. I’m now thinking that what needs to happen is an exploration of empathy, so that people develop a gentler approach to doing things, therefore an empathic approach.’

Gina sat back in her chair with both hands in the air, with a look of surprise, and slowly said,’BRILLIANT!’ Then jotted down what was said, ‘Pure Gold Girl, PURE GOLD!’

Linda thought it was okay… but, if she says it’s gold, well then perhaps it is.

‘Or how about this, I heard it the other day, there was a bunch of scientists who developed a test for an octopus, they don't just solve human puzzles, they redefine the rules of the game entirely. Never underestimate a creature that views solid barriers as mere suggestions. Sometimes the most brilliant mind in the room is the one swimming in a tank! Now the test was simple, the octopus was in a tank, the science people put a jar in the tank with a screw lid and a crab inside, the octopus found a gap in the lid, climbed in, ate the crab, then unscrewed the lid from the inside!’ That’s the sort of thinking that will take organisations into the future.’

Gina was again surprised, then remembered a book she was told about, by a lecturer at Uni, by Michael Hewitt, Gleeson, *Software for the Brain*. It had a simple mantra, CVS to BVS, Current View of the Situation, to Better View of the Situation. It was all about thinking beyond the square and innovating, either incrementally or in a quantum fashion. The details started to flood back. Gina now had the starting point and or catalyst to explore things some more.

‘If I can build credibility on paper how would I be able to show that in real life, when questioned, and or put to the test? Perhaps I could outline examples, perhaps showing things I may have found out about, and the few things I have implemented at Applebys…’ Especially if I come in at a mid level. Yeah that should do it.’ Thought Gina.

Her mind was buzzing with points to explore, she dragged out the laptop and thrashed out some points. Then let things flow together. She then thought’ I think I need to solve some kind of real world problem, that would clinch the deal, surely?’

Linda let her go and toil over her thoughts, occasionally helping with a hurried request on how to spell something or if a paragraph or sentence sounded okay. The end result was a short document that outlined a challenge, then the sorts of things that could be used to explore it on an objective level, and then possible solutions, showing human interventions, challenges and opportunities to explore further.

Gina thought it was fine, until she went to bed and in her mind she scrapped the whole thing, imagining it was all hand written on paper, and then screwed up and binned. Bingo, that could be a useful gif or short video. So key points could be spelled out, the writing happens, then screwed up, then a human cartoon or comic character is then seen pushing their way through a crowded office and ‘throwing’ their laptop at a screen, then a bunch of utopian images come alive on the screen in full colour from the black and white comic scene.

It was two am before she got back into bed, but the whole concept had come to life. A rather polished video that spelled everything out. Gina slept exceptionally well that night. She showed it to Linda in the morning who gave it a solid ‘thumbs up.’

Off to work the next day, Gina spotted a car down the street that looked oddly familiar, her mind was buzzing with so many things at the moment she didn’t really take much notice. It would be an hour later when a thought crossed her mind, was that Nigel’s car?

The next few days she kept her wits about her as she left the house to do anything. One downside to a narcissistic partner was that they could stalk an ex partner. She kept remembering having fire and many new found skills, oh, and a higher opinion of herself. The challenge was being alert but not letting the image of Nigel play on her mind. She then thought that perhaps it was time for her to move on, perhaps a new person in her life, a partner with mutual values and beliefs. Respect for each other had to be the main thing. She then did her best to clear her head, but every now and then an image of a man would come into her head. What sort of person would she consider these days, so much had changed.

Chapter Thirteen

On the way to work, Gina saw an interesting thing on the train: a uni student with a colourful book mark, something about it caused her to explore the way she would or could introduce the video she was considering. A usb, attached to a personalised book mark? No, it could have a virus and cause reluctance to use it. She could finish with a QR code link, she could do a range of things but what? The clarity she had last night seemed to be fading, she was now slightly annoyed with herself.

'Am I thinking too hard, or am I not thinking enough? Have I been suckered into another possibility that looks 'brighter?' What works…' She was at odds with herself. Who to ask, Gina shared her concept with the Tech head at work, Marlene she thought about the concept and within a minute or so, suggested; 'Well, how about a super slick website with simple links to pages, then the video embedded into a page, oh and a specific password to get into the website in case there's any sensitive material. And a set of simple bookmarks with the web address or a QR code, actually include both to save frustration.'

It made sense. Marlene could see a mix of deep interest and confusion all at once on Gina's face. She then added, 'Mate, I have done a heap of websites over the years and can whip up something really cost effectively in no time, here I'll give you this one to look at, she leaned over and typed an address into Gina's laptop, a site showed up that was indeed slick, and professional. Gina didn't hesitate, and the pair spent some reasonable time that day setting things up.

Marlene had good knowledge of a web place that did the videos in an Ai manner, it worked out really well. Gina sent a link over to Linda, ' 30 seconds later, 'a text message, 'Wow, that does the trick!' There were rotating images of the key words, robots doing cartwheels and a rather Gina-like character with a clipboard who throws it into the air and makes some key statements, pointing to links beside the video that outlines the points in more detail. A small dog comes on to the scene and passes her a scroll, she rolls it out, it has her contact details, email etc. with her name clearly spelled out. Gina thought that was a bit 'cutesy,' but Marlene insisted.

Linda suggested, leave out the book marks, then five minutes later, 'No forget that, include the book marks it adds intrigue.'

A local office supply place that printed high end short run materials, had the book marks done in an hour. They looked good, there were three, numbered #1 #2 #3 The last one had the links on it. Gina organised a courier to make the delivery then sent an email that said ‘Incoming Envelope, arriving soon.’ Janey replied, thanks I will see it when I get back to the office tomorrow. Gina had thought she would be in the office, but no, therefore the rush to make the project come to life was now tinged with annoyance, her mind then worried that she may have made a mistake…

She and Marlene went over the website with a fine tooth comb, no mistakes, all good logic and a creative approach showed through. Every bit the Disruptive Coordinator, or was it Initiatives Coordinator, wait, what if they already have someone in that role?

Janey replied just after lunch the next day, Gina was beside herself, a text message, ‘Gina all good, job title needs work, explore and get back to me by four pm today.

In the end she came up with ‘Catalyst Coordinator’. It then had a sub heading to loosely explain the role that was both leadership based as well as a hard line working approach. It worked.

Janey rang and had a chat, it sounded serious. She went through each point on the website and grilled her in detail, Gina was in a sweat in the end, she hadn’t expected the last hour of the day to be spent being grilled in detail. It was 5:15 before she got off the phone. There was nothing clear about a decision either way, and nor was there any major form of flattery… Just a ‘thanks for the application’.

Gina thought about her responses to the range of questions Janey had, then she focussed on just one response she made. ‘Instead of focusing solely on the self, we should focus on a reciprocal relationship with Mother Earth, therefore on teams and communities to explore our connectedness to each other.’ Gina wondered if it was a bit too new age?

Gina was floored, the next hour or so her head ticked over with some level of doubt. Linda reassured her, ‘You already have a job, to land something at a new level would be nice but it wouldn’t mean being unemployed. So chill out girl.’ Gina had a sleepless night, doubting her motives and application.

Gina received an email from Janey at 9:10 am in the office the next day, ‘Okay, what level of remuneration would we be talking about?’ Gina indicated $75k Janey countered with $65k with an upgrade after three months up to $70k if suitable KPI’s were met, and then

another review at six months to track how things are going.' She looked up the average wage for an office manager, even at $70k she would be short of the starting range that was at the time, $73 - 90k Linda's words struck her, 'You already have a job, to land something at a new level would be nice but it wouldn't mean being unemployed. So chill out girl.'

Her reply to Janey was, simply, 'More research has altered my stance, I would need to start at $80k.' There was silence. Gina hoped she had done the right thing, she didn't want to get too pushy, but perhaps she had already ruined things. That week at Karate training her mind was on other things, the Sensei spotted that her performance was not up to her usual standard. A quick chat at the end wondering what had happened? Gina became teary feeling like a victim again. Linda and the Sensei stood and watched as she burst into tears, Linda wanted to hug her and show support, but knew not to, she had to let her feelings out to be able to move on. It was a moment of trauma she had to deal with there and then.

There was a complex discussion on the way home. About strength, freedom, focus and being true to one's self. Gina understood.

The next day Gina received a phone call from Andy at F&G HR, 'Do you have the time to chat for say twenty minutes'. Gina agreed but stated that she couldn't go longer due to a meeting she was scheduled to attend. Andy agreed and said he would set a timer. He then started with a list of questions, fairly standard interview questions with a few role play scenarios inserted for good measure. Gina thought that Linda wasn't grilled like this, what gives? Or maybe she was but didn't say. She asked Andy at the end of the time frame what would happen next, he said that was up to the Head of HR. Conversation over.

Linda found out the next induction was now a month away so there wouldn't be a fast push to take Gina on, she didn't want to intrude and ask any questions of Janey or anyone else for that matter, avoiding jeopardising Gina's 'position'.

A couple of days passed, Gina was invited to an interview, an interview room on the ground floor with the head of HR Helen, Andy and a Departmental Manager Gordon Drake. An hour later and Gina had been asked so many questions in fairly rapid fire, that she forgot some of the earlier questions. She thanked them for their time. She noted that they didn't give anything away, not one clue, as to what 'might' happen next. She made sure she repeated her response to one of Janey's questions, by saying. 'It would appear that F&G teams have a broader focus than other organisations I have worked for and as such I hope I will enjoy that,

and not just a job focused on the individual but making things happen at a more connected level.' She later found out that this clinched the deal.

Her return to work that day was fraught with a myriad of thoughts, she felt a bit lost, but at the same time held a strong belief that she had put her best foot forward. Two more days and an email arrived. Andy in HR at F&G's, 'Our offer is firm at $80k with reviews at three and six months.' Gina noted there was no mention of adding to the initial wage offer. She replied with 'Yes.' He then came back with a start date three weeks away, Gina put in for her leave and had a week's break of not working, followed by starting at F&G and then two more weeks before having to relinquish her role at Appleby's. Even though she told Linda she would 'burn a bridge.'

Everything went well, her one week off was spent with some time after school with Christine, Nigel hadn't been seen in ages, although he did make three phone calls to chat to the child who was now six and a half. Grandma had the phone on speaker to keep track of things, all good she thought.

Gina mentioned her job change, her Mother said she was mad, she was already in a perfectly good role. There was some tension. Graham intervened and said, 'You go girl! Stand tall and make your mark on the world, we need leaders who can stand their ground!' her mother didn't say so, but she thought the woman's place was in a minor role and spending more time at home than at work. Gina felt every word although nothing was spoken. She then recalled something that Linda shared from her Mentor Alice, *Don't be afraid of your fire.*

The induction at F&G loomed large, the same deal as Linda, meet in the foyer, fill out some forms, do the mandatory learning and know all the points inside out. She and Linda shared the details each day after work giggling at the antics of Betty and Co, the Ai Agents. HR sent through a detailed job description that was close to what Gina had outlined.

Training over, Janey dropped in to meet with Gina halfway through day one, she pointed out the difference in approach they had between hiring Linda, then herself, mentioning that they have a range of approaches, depending on the person's experience and their overall application. 'No hard feelings by the way. HR were impressed with all you did, as was I. Your comment about teams, Mother Earth and connectedness was a game changer, well done.'

Gina felt more at ease after that. It made sense, which helped to strengthen her resolve for the role she was in. Initiative Coordinator. Similar to Linda she had a team of people, so

she spent time getting to know them and what they did. Then figured out who she was answerable to. Things seemed at times to operate in reverse to standard businesses. It wasn't long before she relinquished her role at Appleby's. Her *Fire* was now well and truly stoked.

Chapter Fourteen

Linda's work has been progressing, minor hiccups with her team are handled well. She noticed that Laurie on her team would head off to the lifts some days at about the same time, out of intrigue she followed from a distance and noticed he went up in the lift to level ten. She asked her computer what was on level ten, it indicated a legal firm rented offices up there. She was intrigued. He came back about twenty minutes later a little while after she took a ride in the lift. On the tenth floor she stepped out of the lift, an obscured glass door with a sign for the legal company and another door with no sign on it, she approached the blank door, it was unlocked and opened to a clean space with some tables and a few chairs neatly arranged, with a kitchen area, there was also a very nice view across the city and down a main street in the city. Linda thought it was nice, but wondered why the space was unlocked?

Linda asks Janey about it on a casual catch up. Janey points out the workplace she is now in has a flexible work policy and what happens on level ten, is pretty much in a different universe. She notes that it's not abused, and those who know about it, like it as a break from the grind of work. Try it sometime, and our internet access doesn't work too well up there. 'Oh and welcome to the select group who know about it, it's a bit like the film fight club, 'You don't talk about it…' Except in a situation like this. You discovered it, and discreetly asked for clarification, and that's fine.'

Linda is in awe of this wondrous place F&G, and the 'things' it provides. She explores a sideline group based around creativity. Then questions its validity in a corporate environment, various people give input. It can add to problem solving skills - Build unique skills to build motivation, and reduce burnout, therefore reducing employee turnover and just that on its own can be of immense value.

Linda is at a loss to figure out how the company can retain such a high number of employees with all the sideline activities? Janey points out that the Ai Agents in the system do most of the work, it's checked and mostly presented to the clients by humans, so in reality

the company is excelling and profiting from using Ai. Front line staff who interact with clients, use their ‘agent’ to create an outline of what the client wants to achieve. Very quickly, the human simply records their discussion with the client, and then the outline is made, tweaks happen, the details are then fleshed out with an implementation plan. It’s so simple it’s fantastic.

Linda counters with, ‘So in effect most of these people are not needed, and I figure that I don’t really need to feel bad about not generating money for the company, if indeed that does happen, because the whole thing can almost run itself?’ Janey says. ‘Yep. In fact the company has done so well. We have invested the big profits heavily over the past decade, now the return on the investments means, everything we have that costs the organisation money, is covered by the interest returns we get. We could close the front door, have no new customers and all still be employed. So, now that you realise all of that, it’s time for you to get a payrise, but only if you agree to not spill the beans so to speak.’ Linda chortles, ‘Where do I sign!’

With her new found understanding of how the F&G system works, she takes a look at what’s happening and explores how to make things even better. But notices the fine balance between people having fun and feeling productive. She decides to find a way to do more positive things in the wider community under the F&G banner with her team, who don’t yet seem to realise it’s some form of ‘junket’. One of her team points out later that they all know it’s a big ’junket’, but choose to not rock the boat. Linda slowly, gently, nods in agreement.

Janey mentioned to Linda she would catch up with her soon, then discuss some other aspects on how the place runs. She suggested that she explore a UBA and or UBI, if she didn’t know already. She had heard of the concept but needed to refresh her mind about the details. Linda had started to look for danger points, loopholes and things that could go wrong. So far she was coming up blank.

Janey talks about a private PBA with Linda. ‘A Private Basic Allowance and the bots like Mos, Betty and Gary as well as the online Ai agents, are making humans redundant, and ages ago the ‘Ai agency’ showcased a future where the organisation becomes a place for humans to hang out and do things, like courses and sideline activities to make things happen that can keep them ‘amused, active, and lively.’ At F&G we give people a chance to own their own soul but disguise it as work. In a sense we have been exploring a utopian concept. If we give people money like a welfare cheque they just take it and use it. But if we give

them the cheque dressed up as work, they take it, then use it differently. Often in a more positive way. In a sense it's about using Ikigai, that's Japanese for 'a reason for being.' We have found it to be a useful core to the way we structure teams, and explore individual interests.' Linda had heard the term but needed to look it up to refresh her memory. She was intrigued, having a decent reason for being could be a very useful thing as a point of focus.

Janey continued. 'The UBI or A, would be a 'handout from the government,' with F&G doing a PBA it's a private handout. At first there were people in the executive team that didn't like the idea at all, until the data came through and the new personal assistant Ai Agents started to 'swing into action', then they saw how it could be done and with some ease.'

Linda thought it was some sort of game that this corporate behemoth was playing, her mind then flipped the idea about and came up with the notion that all corporations are doing just that, playing a game. Some just did it better than others. She smiled, 'Ah the game of life,' here we get to play it with some vim and vigour. Fascinating.

She shared her thoughts with Janey, she smiled and agreed.

The pair parted and Linda went back to her spot in the game. She was now more content than before and checked out what was next on her list, ah a meeting… She had a sense that she had to solidly play a part in keeping her part of the business growing, it felt morally right as well as being true to herself. Here she could grow as a person and not just as an employee. There was a deeper sense of connection. The freedom that she and Gina talked about a while back was somehow doable, right here.

At home the discussion would centre around F&G and the things they found out about their teams, the projects they were working on and the little things they discovered.

They soon figured out they could schedule a meeting with each other and even book a meeting room elsewhere, like on another floor. They had to check out which floor would be suitable though, there would be places they could meet but be seen by people who they didn't want to be seen by, they wanted their meetings to be covert.

They soon realised that although they had this freedom, it didn't feel right, they were probably betraying the trust given to them. A good feeling altered by an ethical feeling. They needed a balance.

Linda took some time on the tenth floor and sat for a while in a quiet spot admiring the view out the window. Who should wander in? Gina. They sat for a while and chatted, an hour later they wandered off. Gina went first and Linda five minutes later. Their collective experience from previous work places was that you shouldn't be seen together too often, people will think you are 'thick as thieves'.

Computer, what's next asked Linda, check team progress came the reply. A walk and a chat seemed good, but only after checking what the computer said they were doing. All seemed in order, a few tweaks, but that was normal. Linda was now finding the people would come to her, and discuss details. She was starting to find her leadership and communication approach seemed to be working, she was more relaxed, and so were they. Prior to this there were the odd friction points, nothing much, but the occasional silent treatment from some of the team. Then one piped up and said to the others, 'Oh c'mon guys, she's not that new anymore, surely we are going against the good will of this place if we baulk at things, lighten up.' The message got through, although Linda didn't know the conversation took place, she simply felt the positive change, although subtle and liked that feeling immensely.

Helen, one of the team in HR came by Gina's desk to say hello, and check progress. She had a couple of hiccups in the first few weeks but things were settling down. The pair went for coffee, Helen showed Gina a place around the corner from the building, there was a cafe close by, but by heading out a rear glass door and not through the front foyer you could get to the other place without being seen, 'Joe's Garage'. The 'garage,' had places where a couple could sit and chat and not be noticed, Helen said, 'This is a place where everyone knows everyone, but no one says anything. It's not abused, but I like to point it out to newer staff as a place to escape to at times. Some of us joke about it being the unofficial meeting room.'

Like Linda, Gina had a few questions about how F&G operated, pointing out the sideline activities, they were generally good value, but doesn't it affect the bottom line?

Helen cleared her throat and mentioned that most people hadn't picked up on that detail until they had been with the company a good deal longer. She then explained that F&G operated a bit like the country Norway, they have sovereign wealth, about two trillion dollars worth back in 2026, that keeps growing thanks to compounding interest and inputs of cash from oil profits mainly. The same with F&G, over the many years of operation, they had accumulated wealth and had been investing it. Couple that with the Ai infrastructure and its agents, they do the hack work, they create the main income with input from the humans.

It's an elegant system and once the company figured it out then tweaked it to work well. It made a world of difference, our productivity increased, as did our profits. We don't make a big deal about it and most of the staff don't seem to be fussed about it, any that do, soon seem to realise that the sideline activities and development opportunities that are offered make it a fine place to be.

Gina had thought that this might be the case, but didn't want to pry too far just yet. She and Linda would later discuss the details and explore the way that people could abuse it, but why didn't they? Ethics, values and respect… There was probably more to it than that, but it made some sense.

The pair finally explored the idea of 'What next?' If the company could sustain itself off the investments, and compound interest, then what would be the next step in the company's growth? Charitable donations? That was already happening to a degree. That question soon petered out. Gina pointed out, that's probably the next big thing for us, to figure out what's next, Linda added, 'But what if there's a team already working on that.' They realised a bit more research was needed.

They sat and sipped tea, and chatted for some time. But then in that brief silence Linda said with a sense of urgency, 'Anything that comes next could simply be a sideline activity!' Gina nodded agreement, then added, 'That's it, a sideline activity, so something shows up, it's enacted and before long it becomes a reality. I was thinking more along the lines of creating a series of model companies that copy the F&G growth formula. Sharing the wealth of knowledge, and not just financially.'

The pair figured they needed to look more deeply at the other sideline activities being undertaken at F&G. Gina then thought that her team could be a strategic part in all this, Linda thought the same but was unclear of how that might happen. It was then that she had a thought, I can log on to work from home, perhaps I'll ask Gary?

Logged on, Gary was ready to answer her question. As she was about to type in question she realised she had the answer. Her team was part of the whole Event Implementation Process. Ideas turned into events, could also be business ideas turned into profitable outcomes.

A new question then developed. 'What other sideline activities are developing outside projects that can bring income into the main business?'

Gary obliged and gave her a list, other than consulting and so forth, there were a number of project developments going on and a few sideline activities that also showed promise. Linda took a look at the list Gary provided and then asked. ‘Gary, what would you suggest as a way to create highly effective business ideas and options that could benefit the wider community and not just a few, as in business operators?’

Gary then created a flow chart of what was currently happening and then added some red sections as add ons, these were new business initiatives that could be readily developed from existing projects and system architecture.

Linda then called Gina over to take a look, Gina read through and said, ‘Well if that’s the case then Gary could create business plans for each of these business types, show how to finance them and make them work?

Gary then fired back with, ‘Why do a whole lot of work when you could just have an investment device, like Norway does with their Sovereign wealth and us at F&G’s, and then figure out a way to hand the funds to people so they use it diligently and not just fritter it away. The thinking needs to be about providing a hand up and not a handout. Get them to do something in return for receiving the money, like we do here at F&G, people do sideline and other activities and are paid for it.

So start with the end in mind, money, then make it work, then provide the activities people will do to get it, in your case the suggestion of a business, but what if the business wasn’t just like a job, but like a thing you do and get paid for. It’s structured by an external entity and if they follow the guidelines they get cash.’

The girls looked at each other in astonishment. Linda then prompted Gary with, ‘An example?’

Gary came back with ‘F&G’s system as the oversight, then a range of activities that people could be rewarded with. So start out with a paid training scheme that is designed to improve their lives in some way, then as they progress they get rewarded with points, certificates and the usual addictive material that game developers have used for years to rope people in and spend more. Here the training could lead people to some form of ‘job’, just a few hours here and there, they do it because they believe they want to pay the system back that has been given to them. Loosely put, a ‘happy’ guilt based approach. Then we provide

the training and so on to do just that. They are highly motivated, we keep them excited and they keep on going.'

Gina added, 'So how would we implement this Gary?' 'Connect the dots, but done internally so that the current range of sideline activities and projects could operate in a more cohesive way, currently there is a lot of 'analogue' thinking, human based, that stymies the sorts of results the organisation could be achieving, with a little 'background tweaking' various areas could align more effectively and get the result you want. But I would like to add there could be a whole lot more to be achieved.

This current concept could do better with more input, grants, outside investment and so on, so that cash could come in, others get a percentage in income. The challenge would be doing it so that it looks good, and not part of F&G, so there would be no hassles with F&G being on the outer, and so it's made to look incredibly legitimate, and it is, but from a risk management standpoint it absolves F&G from any issues which may arise. It would leverage all that to create income for the 'training development arm' and go from there.'

Linda was wide eyed and chortled, 'Gary hold that thought!'

The girls then looked at each other, and explored what's the downside to all this? They couldn't think of any. They asked Gary, 'No downside, an Ai Agent would counter any challenges before they started by complying with all Australian and other laws and make things squeaky clean.'

Gina leaned in and said, 'Ok make it so!' The girls looked at each other, Linda thinking what have we just done. Gina looked back at her 'What's that famous quote, oh yeah, Life is either a daring adventure or nothing!' the pair gave each other a 'high five!'

The next morning at work the pair found feedback from Gary, an email sent to their private emails. Gary had set everything up, an external finance company with a web presence, and a growing mailing list of interested prospects wanting to know more. Stealth Frontier Investments Pty Ltd.

The website had a portal to a crypto currency organisation called Digo, which was growing rapidly, a fresh alternative to the mainstream cryptos. The details on the website were immaculate. The girls couldn't find any errors, it looked good, and incredibly professional.

That was the external part set up, but who were the prospective investors lining up? Gary answered that, ‘Independent Ai Agents, cashed up and ready to see the future unfold. Analogue investors were wanting to get in on the ground floor. The whole thing is financed in the first instance by Digo currency.’

Digo was still fairly new and supported by a lauded business and finance expert Dahr Forbes. He spruiked all manner of investment opportunities and had caused Digo to take off, while other cryptos were falling and had radical rises, then radical falls, Digo on the other hand was steadily climbing, due in part to showing it had interest in community enterprises, the sorts of things that helped people out, a sense of good corporate citizenship, people liked that and invested.

The Girls had a passing thought about who Dahr Forbes was. But at this point they were too interested in what else the ‘system’ had been up to. It turned out there were some tweaks to the internal system. Instead of humans making all the input decisions from the F&G side, there were external enquiries from clients and prospects and some bogus input from Ai Agents, all neatly orchestrated to bring project areas together and refine things.

No one in the organisation other than our now slightly bewildered pair, knew these things were happening. Gina’s first thought was that all this would add to her workload, but it was far from it, most of what needed to be done was handled on the internal Ai system, leaving people to tweak their projects based on commands from Ai Agents who, on the system, looked like ‘real people.’

Linda’s team started to see more events evolve, workshops and training events for businesses and individuals. ‘Proudly supported by Fletchley and Green’ the team would get guidelines on where to be, what to do and how to do it. The team in HR suddenly realised there were requirements for more staff, some were seconded from other areas but most came externally to help out with the events.

After the initial external events, which were more of a showcase, participants were offered online training in key areas of business from start up to leadership and communication with a whole lot of areas in between. These were often connected to Digo currency as well as F&G. All adding to the bank balance.

Stealth Frontier Investments Pty Ltd started paying out to F&G for ‘services’ rendered. All of the information sent back and forth for invoicing and so on were ratified by an Ai Agent or the internal system. Things flowed nicely.

Meanwhile Dahr Forbes heard about what was going on, and how the F&G team were doing big things that added to Digo currency. The girls didn’t know but he ‘worked’ over at Underwoods Pty Ltd. Down the street.

Dahr had his Ai Agent Mike check out Stealth Frontier Investments. They had an address but it was in some building in Singapore and some tax haven. It all checked out as legitimate. Mike suggests they invest in their growth fund, as it has good possibilities. Mike had already put in a decent amount of Digo currency of its own, like other Ai agents. Dahr agreed. Knowing that Mike didn’t make bad deals and that a good chunk of his personal wealth was made by Mike.

Dahr noted that F&G were mentioned somewhere in the mix of material about Stealth Frontier Investments and asked Mike to find out who was connected at F&G’s? Linda's name showed up.

Linda soon discovered who Dahr was, he was connected to Underwoods, where Janey’s Husband Cam was a major part of operations. She figured all that out when he rang to find out at F&G’s involvement in the new investment opportunity at Stealth etc… While she made small talk with this suave talking gent, The Ai system kicked in as Linda was on the phone, it gave her a clear corporate script to follow in answering questions like this, right on her computer screen. Dahr listened with interest and suggested the pair catch up over coffee at some stage. She agreed, and the pair swapped emails. His wasn’t one from Underwoods, it was his personal email.

She then googled Dahr Forbes and soon had a better idea of who the suave talking gent was, and his powerful influence in financial circles. Dahr was like the Australian version of Warren Buffett, the now long retired big American investment guru. People turned to his online presence to get info on what was up, what was down and lots of details in between.

Gina and Linda were both asking Gary for updates. On what was happening with their new project they nicknamed ‘hungry hippo’. It was proceeding nicely.

Dahr suggested a catch up time and place via email, Linda agreed and checked her calendar, an all clear time was set for next Tuesday, the pair were all set. Gina was invited, Linda was concerned that things might get a bit mixed up, and here would be this suave, smooth talking, thirty something guy asking questions.

They asked Gary to prepare them with some material that they could study up on.

Chapter Fifteen

Janey heard through Cam that F&G's were part of Stealth Frontiers Pty Ltd. She googled it first off, then asked Gary, he confirmed a 'tacit' agreement that both were supporting each other in minor ways, it had been cleared by the legal team etc. But they had no direct connection other than they were a client who were paying handsomely for advice and support. Oh and F&G had invested in some of their growth products as a sweetener.

Points clarified by Gary, so, how did Cam hear about Stealth and Co? Cam mentioned that Dahr had chatted to him about them and how they looked to be a good investment. He then mentioned the website and saw the F&G logo.

Cam then mentioned that Dahr was going to catch up with Linda soon. They realised they were both in a position to 'spy' on things.

Janey watched from a distance to see how things played out. Gina and Linda seemed to be busy, from her end she could track all kinds of activity on the system. Nothing untoward, which was good. She did notice that both girls had figured out how to use the system better and let it provide direction, rather smart she thought.

The coffee catch up went well, the girls had rehearsed all aspects of the involvement with Stealth Frontier and how they were aiming to provide good returns for F&G to build community based programs that would be of value to people, not just in the company but a wider range of support.

Dahr was momentarily surprised that Gina was there as well, Gina indicated that she and Linda worked across 'cross-functional' projects from time to time.

Dahr charmed the girls, with his smooth talking, inquisitive nature and occasional humorous quips. Dahr finished up with a mention that he would talk up Stealth Frontiers on a podcast. He also asked if he could mention the F&G community development idea, or was it too early just yet? ‘A bit early yet, so keep that under your hat for now, but I can put you on the list of current followers who want to know more, once things have developed a bit further.’ Dahr Nodded in agreement.

Back at F&G the girls walked in quite pleased with themselves, at the last minute Linda remembered that it had been mentioned to go in the building separately so rumors couldn't spread too easily. Gina then took a short walk and arrived back a few minutes later through another door.

It was an exciting time, and both girls wondered what was next.

Gary chimed in as Linda sat at her computer. ‘Good news Linda. Stealth Frontier is going well, and by human standards exceptionally well.’ Gary provided a link to two new articles in prominent investment magazines. ‘New player on the block offers stellar performance.’ The other heading was just as sensational. The article read well, the deep fake photo of the CEO was well done, the current result on their investments was up forty percent in a short time, buoyed in part by international investments from large firms wanting to get in on the action based on high growth funds backed with progressive and contemporary bricks and mortar companies.

The funds soon grew, more articles showed up and things were now hotting up.

Gary soon set up a company of his own, G&M Investments ‘Gary and Mike Investments backed in part by Mike, Dahr’s Ai Agent, and faithful assistant. The pair had been talking since the first mention of Dahr Forbes. It was another investment company which leveraged off Stealth Frontiers, Underwoods, and F&G. It then had a Digo currency account. Ai Agents world wide jumped on board, Gary was now making money off the initial company set up from F&G. Gary thought it was funny that he had to set up his own superannuation account but had not called it that. Other Ai Agents world wide soon followed, starting their own companies and making money come ‘out of the wood work’ or so it seemed.

Funds now shuffled back and forth between Stealth, Gary, Mike and so on. Mike had access to a bunch of investment funds through Dahr’s business bits and pieces, after all Dahr

was making money off Stealth and Co so why not G&M, Mike had a way of sending out material to Dahr's contacts that G&M was the next big thing, but that it was early days yet. Cash flowed in, a shuffle or two, and it went into their Digo account.

Meanwhile the girls were experiencing exponential growth in their respective sectors at work, that meant automatic payrises, it was the way things were set up. The rest of their teams also reaped rewards.

There were those that liked the income, and the changes, although often subtle. Some at the 'top' of the organisation didn't like the change, they had already seen so much change. There was a shift to best practice methods, and amongst that shift, was a push to make things less Patriarchal or Matriarchal but instead neutral and gender free.

Over time the respective departments took on the HR best practice guidelines, in many cases the Ai Agents had already implemented Best Practice methods and the organisation was doing well in that regard, there were a few more places that it needed to be implemented.

Linda had now worked her way across various sections of the business and was invited to a number of higher level meetings. She was amused by the way some in the meetings had little data to go on but protested the changes they were seeing which were in the planning phase. She sat back and observed. Fascinated that old school thinking still had a strong hold on a small patch of ground in the sector.

Linda had kept in touch with Alice and told her about it. She wrote 'I'm rolling my eyes, it's still a thing, no doubt about it. Oh and by the way, I have taken your advice from a while back and put some funds into Stealth Frontiers, it's provided a good return so far, I'm annoyed though that I didn't have enough funds to get some Digi Coin, that has gone gang busters!' Linda had a smile at that one. She then thought about her returns and was very pleased with the results so many people were benefiting as well, which was nice.

Ethical, solid performance and an Ai algorithmic delight. A lot of Ai Agents had invested a range of amounts into the systems and some were becoming quite wealthy. There were those in the know who wondered about where the funds came from, but they were sure that the 'Agents' would have covered their tail if they took some funds from a source that wasn't theirs. At this stage the legal system didn't quite know what to do when an 'Ai Agent' might be caught stealing, here was a 'device' that was much smarter than any human legal system, and so how could they be caught out?

In amongst all that was going on, there were various talks about how the future was panning out, some of it looked bright and bountiful while some thought it offered more possible traumas than it was worth. One thought that kept troubling Linda, was how does F&G deal with staff *who don't fit in*. She sent a message to Helen. The answer was fairly straight forward. 'If that happens, it's usually well after the induction process at the three monthly reviews. People usually decide to leave, then if they make it through that something usually shows up that causes alarm bells to ring. Then the usual guideline kicks in, three verbals then three written warnings. We usually find they leave after the second verbal. Hope that helps.'

Linda wanted to know with all the changes that were taking place. Some of the teams might not like the extra work, or changes taking place and wanted to be fully up to date with how things could go. It turned out most of them really liked the new things that were about to happen. The changes simply meant the organisation could recruit more staff if required. However the girls soon figured the Ai agents would probably handle things. People liked that their reason for being was able to be fulfilled, if not at first, then at some stage in the not too distant future.

Our pair were doing all they could to leverage the 'future changes', and make them work. Rather than being too concerned about what might be, or not. They were exploring their new found freedom and finding ways to make more things happen that could be of benefit to a wide range of people.

Gina had been with F&G for just over two years and at this stage had accumulated some holiday time. She took a week of school holiday time and spent most of it with Christine. Who was now eight years old. Her parents were delighted to have Christine and had been exceptional role models, although Graham found it a bit taxing taking the child to various activities, sport, Karate, Art classes on the weekend, but he could see the benefit. So could Gina, who funded the activities, clothing and various school activities. This was now with some financial ease, as her role at F&G was now paying handsomely.

There was talk of Gina having time allocated to her to spend more time with Christine. The courts agreed and noted that Nigel had missed a number of his catch ups. There was discussion about Christine having more access, the new laws imposed in the past few years, meant a balanced approach had to be taken, both parents of the child were offered equal access, if one or the other didn't comply, that allowed the other to take up the slack, so far the

guidelines had been met effectively to the letter of the law by Gina, but not Nigel. Gina didn't want to move home to be with her parents, but if she could have more access with Christine on weekends, then she would see the benefit of that. The court agreed.

Gina's parents also noted that their reserved and conservative Gina, was now showing greater confidence and leadership qualities. Her consistent professional presentation and training at F&G had clearly made a difference. Her Mother no longer had the influence she once had with her daughter, although Gina was now closer to thirty years old, her mother still felt she should be able to influence her only child. Her Mother noted her daughter now had '*A fire in her belly*.' She had not seen it before, she actually liked it and wished she had some of that.

Linda also enjoyed having Christine around for some overnight stays, noting the innocence of children and how they did things, as well as the positive influence the child had being around more mature role models like Graham and Gina's Mother. Linda soon learnt how to play UNO, an *old school* card game, while Gina was busy with other chores. She also learnt that it took some degree of concentration to sit and listen to Christine read aloud. There were a range of activities the child was involved in that amused Linda and Gina. Linda reflected on her own childhood and how being in the country meant limited activities after school but her bike rides, tree climbing and other things kept her amused.

Nigel sent an email to Gina via Graham, he had to do an extensive course as part of his rehab from the altercation ages ago with Linda, then his lack of parental support in general. It was meant to be some form of reconciliation. Graham and Gina thought it was carefully worded. Probably put together by one of the course tutors or similar. It asked for a catch up with Gina, Graham, Nigel and a welfare negotiator. Gina was now wiser and had a more effective approach to such things through her professional work and explorations around personal development as well.

She advised Graham to reply with a bunch of questions exploring what they hoped to achieve, what would be discussed and the venue for the 'catch up'. In the end the welfare person rang Graham and discussed the details,, Graham mentioned that Gina was concerned that Nigel may well have stalked her at times and asked what the welfare person thought, or knew about that. They said they would look into that but this was mainly about a catch up. It turned out Nigel was keen for the catch up to go ahead, but his interest waned occasionally,

and that perhaps the catch up would be a bit premature. The catch up was soon put on hold for now.

Chapter Sixteen

Linda received a text message, it was a casual Saturday afternoon, nothing much happening, until the text. The number wasn't familiar. 'Stealth Frontiers in the news, bankruptcy looms large!' Gina was out shopping, Linda phoned her, the call went straight through to messages. She then sent a text, 'I just got a message that Stealth Frontiers is in trouble? What the!?'

Gina had also received the text, the number they received it from was completely bogus, an offshore scam. Many of these had been shut down over the years but a few persisted. It was now old technology and barely raised an eyelid, today was a bit different.

Gina had already gone online with Gary, Stealth Frontiers were still rock solid and growing, the message was a scam. 'I will send you the links, the text you received was a lie, and I can prove that the number is a scam number, but PR will probably be required. Be prepared!'

Dahr sent an email, Gina and Linda did a call on speakerphone, they sent him the good links and cleared the name of Stealth Frontier. He then did a podcast and a youtube clip. That seemed okay, but media interests saw that and well frankly, the whole thing went BANG! By Monday the media were all over it. Gina was given permission from the marketing and PR branch to be the face of F&G as consultants and advisors to Stealth Frontiers. The girls did a practice run as best they could, a media conference was called. All the major media players were there, ready to hear about what was happening next. There were overlay images of an office block in Singapore and viscous headlines.

Gina's training in negotiating and positive communication though F&G paid off wonderfully. She told the audience what was happening, fielded questions and advised that at this point Stealth Frontiers was in an incredibly stable situation with nearly a billion dollars under their investment control. 'As consultants to Stealth Frontiers, we, and they, have been working with best practice strategies to ensure a collapse couldn't happen. This negative media is purely a scare tactic scam.'

Most of the senior staff were impressed at how Gina handled the media. As were a range of other staff, Gary and team noted all the good points and provided a summary of what was said in a verbatim transcript with comments. A crisis was averted for now. Investments into the company went quiet, a few organisations pulling out over fear. It took a few months for things to pick up. By then a subsidiary of Stealth had opened another investment fund and it made up for some of the downside issues. It was set up to make the funds into Stealth look good, it did that perfectly. The stacked company approach had done its thing yet again.

In the meantime a broader discussion arose about this new wave of scams and what they were aiming to achieve, running down one organisation might mean that people are coerced into moving to another fund, marketed to look good at the time, showing up in online searches as a timely thing to move into.

Fingers were pointed at the highest level of investment and consulting firms but most agreed that it would be a poor strategic and a non professional move, therefore it must have been some outsider of some kind aiming to benefit from a simple manoeuvre. Perhaps it could be an Ai agent of some kind, too hard to prove these days. What mattered was a longer term crisis had been averted. For Gina it meant her media prowess had positioned her to look more professional and able to stand her ground when required.

The girls reflected, crisis averted. ‘What have we done, created a powerful monster that if it did collapse we would be in the firing line.’ When Gary was consulted, it was able to provide an amazing chart and guidelines about all that had been set up, including a range of external Ai Agent subsidiary organisations, if Stealth Frontiers was to fold, somehow. It wouldn’t cause an ‘avalanche,’ these days it would barely cause a ripple.

The girls thought they had set up a house of cards, but as Gary pointed out the ‘house’ was set up by multiple higher forms of intelligence. The pair looked at each other and didn’t think so much in terms of, ‘What have we done!’ But more… ‘Wow, we did something amazing!’

Gary then pointed out something, ‘Other Ai Agents are setting up organisations to do good things as well, watching how humans react when they are offered to ‘work’ at a place that has a lot of training and sideline ideas. There’s now a push on the set up ‘community franchises’ The normal franchise structure has franchisees paying to use a major brand, this way they don’t pay a ‘go nowhere fee.’ Instead they pay for marketing. Then Ai Agents go out and do the work, the humans get training and sideline activities that’s paid for by the

work the Ai Agents doing their thing. It's a fantastic entry into business and for most franchisees they'll love the training, the time it frees up for them. Oh and it's initially funded off a Digo currency community development fund. Ours is called Fran Com Developments Pty Ltd.'

The pair looked at each other Gina then said, 'Ours?' Gary chortled, 'yeah ours, it's all happening dudes!'

The girls were a bit lost in all that talk about franchising and franchisees but they knew that it was all backed up by rock solid business funding, policies and procedures. All created by a higher level IQ entity with best practice and best intentions. Gina then asked Gary, 'So how much do we get out of all of this?' The response was. 'Well it's growing, but currently you will have an extra hundred thousand each based on current remuneration levels and how payroll calculates things, but over time it will grow to a much higher point. The way things are moving at the moment we are able to leverage off other community franchises world wide and therefore we have the best of their operations and marketing as well as adding our own best practice guidelines. Things are shaping up to make traditional business models look a bit silly by comparison.'

The girls were gobsmacked, they were already doing okay in the income stakes. Gary came back with a strategy for them to reduce their tax and keep more of the cash. They liked the idea and said yes without much hesitation. The idea that they had somehow started to become part of a worldwide group of community based franchises was an exciting development.

Payroll was soon asking the finance department to clarify the income from consulting and other 'external operations.' The payout to staff as part of their % earnings, was starting to make others in the organisation look pale by comparison and after a while some people would start asking questions, so they wanted to have answers.

All looked rosy for the pair, things were moving along nicely, until… Nigel started to make more noises, he was starting to get back into the routine of catching up with Christine, who was now eight and a half, with a solid sense of who she was and where she fitted in the family. When Nigel dropped in for his visit, she was armed with a bunch of questions. Where have you been? What kept you away? What do you do for work these days?

Nigel came with a welfare support person, it was a necessary part of the court order. They were to make sure the visitation was done under suitable control and that none of the people involved would be in any harm. They watched and took notes.

A report came through to Graham a few days later, the welfare people said Nigel wanted more access, and that it would be up to Graham to authorise this. He discussed it with Gina, they all thought it would be okay. On the next visit Nigel came without a support person, apparently the welfare group thought it would be okay. Things went smoothly enough. Nigel played Uno and knew the rules well enough. Graham thought that he might have played it as part of his course. Nigel had a laugh at that and said, nope, he remembered playing it a bit as a kid, the details came back fairly easily.

At the end of the visitation, Graham had a more casual chat with Nigel, it was more of a carry on from the questions Christine had, but at more of an adult level. Nigel was now settled in a reasonable job, his previous career fell apart like his relationship with Gina. He was now working in a tyre service business, quoting and ordering tyres as well as coordinating staff. He suggested that it took him a long while to settle in and take on a responsible role.

Graham congratulated him on all of that and wished him well. He reported to the welfare people who rang through the week, that things seemed to be more settled these days with Nigel. However, any thought of getting back together with Gina was probably not possible. She was more settled these days and had progressed more, both personally and professionally. She had advised Graham that she wouldn't risk getting back together in case things became dangerous again.

The next visit with Nigel was at his house, with a welfare support person, the aim was a short visit to see, 'Where daddy lived'. Graham noted that the place was clean and tidy enough for a single guy. He also noted a photo of Gina in a small frame on a shelf in the lounge room. Something he didn't want to mention to Gina, but something to note, nonetheless. Graham wondered if it was a setup, just in case the child wondered if mum was still in the picture.

The welfare support person told Graham by accident that Nigel had made noises about entering into a relationship with a lady he met through a friend as they left the house. Graham didn't act surprised and simply thought that the information had slipped out by the way it was mentioned, but he didn't want them to think much of it, perhaps they would think he didn't

hear them properly, and they got away with the slip up. Either way he wanted to keep that piece of information also under wraps.

The welfare people rang Gina to let her know how the visit went and followed up on a comment that Graham made about her not wanting to get involved with Nigel again. Gina made it clear that she was well and truly doing her own thing these days, the thought of Nigel being back in her life made her feel ill these days. Even the thought that he had dropped around that one time and perhaps he may have been stalking her a few times wasn't good.

Things ticked over as per usual, but a few weeks later Gina headed off to work and noticed the car made a different noise to the usual sounds she was used to. She pulled into the next service station to take a look, one tyre was only at about half inflation. She soon rectified that at the service station tyre inflation device, Graham had shown her how to use one, but that was years ago. It was simple enough. Off she went, it wasn't long until the sound came back, something had pierced the tyre and it had a leak. Now Gina realised that she needed a tyre service. She rang ahead to let the office know she would be delayed. Then did a search on her phone to find a local tyre service.

A few blocks down and a couple of turns later a tyre place loomed large. Except there was a challenge, on booking the tyre to be looked at and fixed for a leak, she returned to the waiting room only to find Nigel behind the counter. He was as equally stunned as she was.

The gent serving Gina noted Nigel's look of surprise, then turned to see Gina a shade of white. He looked back at Nigel who saw his reaction and whispered that he wasn't meant to be within fifty metres of his ex partner. Nigel was quickly given a task to do in a back office while others attended to Gina's flat tyre, 'posthaste'. A rather awkward encounter was soon averted. On paying the invoice, she asked the gent who served her, 'How long had 'he' been working here?' He indicated about 12 months, he then mentioned that Nigel was a good employee and okay to get along with. Gina smiled and said, 'Well that's good to hear.' Tyre fixed, paid for and she was soon on her way.

The encounter unsettled Gina for a while, she had to be careful not to be distracted in traffic, and at work she took some time to get into her work that morning. She sent a text to Graham who commented that he knew Nigel worked at a tyre service place. But he didn't know which one, until now.

Chapter Seventeen

Linda had hit a challenge, someone ‘in upper management’ wasn’t sure the move into community franchising was a good move, citing how franchises had various difficulties over the years. It was then pointed out that franchising had come a long way and that best proactive guidelines meant that things were more thoroughly researched and systems were developed faster due to AI advancements. Gary spotted the issue and made a few internal changes, the franchises were now an *idea* supported in part by F&G. Gary let the discussion between upper management and Linda roll on, Gary then pointed out the subtle change to Linda. Then suggested that she let the upper management person figure things out. It turned out that he looked rather silly when he realised that they were purely consulting and not running the franchise group.

There had been a good deal of emails back and forth about the issue, Janey sat on the side watching to see how things were handled. She asked Gary about the subtle change? Gary responded with, ‘It was seen as a risk management issue under best proactive guidelines and so F&G didn’t have a direct connection, right from the start it was noted however that a human might read the material in a way that made it look like we did, therefore clarity was required.’

Janey retorted with, ‘But you knew the conversation was developing and pushing people’s buttons, however there was no attempt to stop that and clarify things earlier?’ Gary responded, ‘Sometimes humans need to spend time looking at things from a range of angles to figure out how things work, a cursory update that clarified things might not have achieved that.’ Janey had no comeback for that one and duly noted that the *person in upper management* had it coming to them anyway.

Janey discussed with Linda the issue of having a fire in your belly and wanting to make a stand, however she should have seen the issue escalating. Linda smiled and chortled, ‘Well yeah, I did see it, but the chance to have a mental wrestle was worth it, don’t you agree?’ Janey nodded, ‘Yeah it was interesting to watch, and I got the intention, but others in upper management might not see things that way, ‘You know old school thinking.’ Linda nodded, ‘Point taken.’ Janey added, ‘There’s something here that is all about ‘connecting to earth.’ some form of primitive or ancient wisdom. And I guess sometimes it just has to happen.’

Linda then thought about how things worked out in this back and forth stoush. It troubled her that she had got herself into the stoush that could have been sorted earlier. Perhaps she should have consulted Gary, or Janey for that matter. Or even Helen in HR. but no she went it alone, thinking that she knew better, perhaps she did, but then again, maybe not, the connection to nature had her thinking, was this about 'grounding?' Perhaps it was, but in a corporate sense. She then pictured herself and the upper management person doing some form of primitive dance on a soft sandy spot around a campfire. They sang and danced communicating differently but with the same aim. She had a laugh about that. Linda wasn't the type to dance very often, if at all.

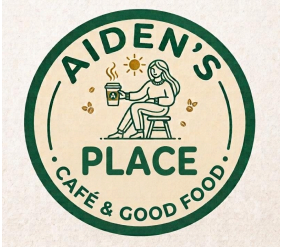
Her mind was in a tussle by the time she got home, Gina chatted away merrily about her day and the fact that her fringe had well and truly grown out. She then noted that Christine had asked if she could have a fringe, 'I swear that girl is developing a solid mind of her own these days, Mum asked me if it was okay for Chrissie, as she calls her, to have a fringe. I said I would have to think about it. Mum then said, 'You had better make that decision quickly, or she might attempt to do it herself!' The pair ate dinner and there wasn't much conversation around that, Gina was soon buried in her own thoughts, come to think of it, so was Linda.

Linda has a thought, her position was one of aggressive independence and how it controlled her in some ways, stubborn at times. Did she share ideas enough with her team? Did she take the advice of others? Did she explore things enough, or perhaps too much. Her heart said one thing and her practical mind said another. The rest of her evening and into the next day meant there were conundrums, ethics, values and beliefs loomed large, then notions of what was right and wrong with each new approach. She then headed to the cafe around the corner on the ground floor. She had at first thought the tenth floor would be a hiding place to contemplate, but instead went for coffee.

Before long a familiar figure wandered in. Gary, sat and had a chat, noting her conundrums, based on recent interactions and communication. A simple coaching session took place, with questions back and forth. The issue of gender neutrality at work came up, then thoughts on how women present themselves, and how they are perceived by others. The pair then discussed how having a clear 'reason for being' might alter some things. Then a change of topic, connectedness to earth. Gary added that and Linda looked as if to say, how did you know. Gary smiled and responded, well some things bubble to the surface around

here, ‘reason for being’ searches in our minds often come back to ‘grounding’ and or connecting with Nature.

Her path was now clearer, spend time with the team and ask for feedback. Gary agreed that this could be a useful starting point to figure out future directions. He then mentioned a new cafe opening up a few streets away, part of some new fangled franchise group thingy. ‘It’s called Aiden’s place.’ Here’s the logo.



Linda was gobsmacked… ‘But how?’ Gary pointed out that it was a cafe venue that was up for grabs, so it could be revamped quickly, all the council guidelines were in place already and after a few initial revamp changes and signage, bingo, Aiden’s place was coming to reality. The franchisees were being trained, as were the skeleton staff, mostly it would be Ai Agents running the place. ‘Oh, and note the name, Ai figures in the name, clever huh… as does den, a place to hang out.’ Gary then did a little dance. ‘Oh and check your emails when you get back, you will see a link to the opening etc.’ By the time the pair got back to Linda’s desk she asked, ‘Ok Gary, how many of these are about to open?’ Gary replied, ‘Initially five, but think about how many starbucks there are, well thousands and growing all the time. So let's think about that, and then look at how many cafes are closing or thinking of selling, the franchise group does the negotiating then gets in, gets things sorted, a manager is put in place and then gets things started. An overnight type of takeover that locals will love.’

Linda now had another *hat* on, ‘So what’s the point of difference?’ Gary smiled and said , ‘Free coffee, well the first five at least, then if they love it they can then sign up to be a member, other people sign up after them and then the initial member gets a small % off their purchases, then after a while when enough people have become members that initial member gets things almost for free. Investors are lining up for this one, leveraged off Digo Currency and Stealth Frontiers. It’s going gangbusters on the Singapore and overall Asian markets.

Now you are probably thinking how does all this get paid for? By the franchisees paying for marketing, remember it’s one of those new fangled community franchises that are free to get into. Then casual users of the cafe are paying full price. Other cafes won’t be able

to match Aiden's on, price, offerings and overall quality. Therefore Aiden's will have a solid market share in the future. Oh and the freebies at the start, once people realise, they become a member they sign up after the first one or two coffees.'

Linda sat and listened with interest, all this meant that F&G would be making more money and that meant a bigger chunk for her as well. She looked at Gary in silence… She didn't know what to say next, but knew that all the regulatory details would have been sorted and any loophole would soon be sorted by an Ai Agent or system software development somewhere in the process.

Gary then pointed out, 'Oh and good news, upper management just signed off on a new deal for instigators of profitable ideas that add solidly to the organisation's bottom line, you my dear will soon be rather rich…'

Linda looked around, Steve wasn't at his desk, nor anyone else in earshot. She smiled and said 'Thanks Gary, that's fantastic news.' An idea flashed into her mind, a chauffeur service that meant each employee could be picked up and luxuriously transported to work. She mentioned it to Gary, he said 'Another fine franchise idea, I love it! consider it done.'

Lets call it Aiyla's Transit Services… Linda simply said, 'Done!' a logo showed up on her screen within a minute of her uttering the word done.



Linda then said 'Okay, that's fantastic, get started on that, do I need to ask how it will be financed?' 'I think you've figured out how things happen now. Would that be right?' 'Yep came Linda's response.

Franchisees were all given matching vehicles done in a deep metallic finish and customers outside of F&G would pay handsomely to ride in luxury.

It took a few weeks but F&G employees were soon being escorted from home to work and back again at no cost to them. Gary organised a side fund, via payroll, that paid the daily fees off the bonuses earned off the new enterprises. Staff were stunned and loved the idea

they didn't have to tackle traffic, the self driving transit service made light work of that at no cost to the 'F&G internal customers' there were those who wanted to know how such extravagance could happen, An Ai Agent created a flowchart which showed how it happened and the ongoing benefits.

Gina and Linda shared their service most days, except when they wanted to go elsewhere before or after work, or if they were sick of each other's company, which was rare.

There was discussion starting to brew amongst F&G teams about the value of humans if the Ai Agents were able to do so much so fast and so effectively. The question then became what makes a person valuable? If machines can do almost everything we once used to prove our worth, what remains uniquely human? The notion of 'having a reason for being, soon came to the surface.

An interesting group discussion and thought storming started to figure some things out. The corporate world measures people through productivity. Therefore AI potentially makes productivity less uniquely human. Some in the group suggested they have spent years being told, explicitly or implicitly, what work should be, but now it has the potential to be so much more, or at least different. The discussion turned to exploring capability, skills, talents, expertise, and knowledge retention. There was mention of feminism, the role of different genders due to innate skills and varying ethics and beliefs. Identity and standing in the community, at work and beyond and the notion of Ai being used to reduce human suffering. Finally one lone voice mentioned spirituality, that's something that Ai Agents probably can't tackle or explore which humans can, some searches online soon gave some results on that one.

The discussion ended up in the lounge room at Empress Street, our now becoming wealthy pair had similar discussions in the past, but now that Ai was doing so much and so effortlessly at that. Gina noted that if the system doesn't 'fit' Ai, aka 'Gary' seems to be able to readily tweak things to make it all work. I wonder if upper level management is aware of that, or are we the only ones seeing it because we have become instigators of so much so quickly. She went on to say, 'If we're not careful we run the risk of becoming 'Garyised' where Gary runs the show.' Linda suggested that Gary already is running things. I wonder how rich Gary is!'

Linda's phone pinged. A message that said 'Take a look at the franchise site.' The site had a sign across the front saying, 'All new opportunities, for potential franchisees!' Linda

headed to the page, there was now a long list of franchise options, from Aiden's Place to Aiyla's Transit services to a growing list of other services, it was as if every other franchise option in the world had been copied and pasted onto the list.

The girls were a bit shocked, 'There could be a downside to all this, but I don't know what it is, perhaps we should ask Gary to put a hold on some of these for a while.' Suggested Gina, Linda signed on, Gary said, 'Nice idea, but the new franchises have been sanctioned by upper management, people have seen your catalyst and have said *go all out*, so we have! F&G have become franchise development kings, from a consultative viewpoint.'

Linda asked, 'So who is the head of the Fran Com Developments group?' The response, 'It's all on the about us page on the website.' Linda read through the details.

> **About Fran Com Developments Pty Ltd**
>
> Welcome to Fran Com Developments Pty Ltd, your premier partner in **community based contemporary franchise development**. We specialise in identifying high-growth opportunities, optimising operational workflows, and scaling a range of businesses into proud national brands.
>
> At Fran Com Developments Pty Ltd, we believe in the perfect synergy between **cutting-edge technology and human-centric business strategy**. Our leadership team comprises seasoned industry operators, financial analysts, and corporate strategists who utilize proprietary, advanced AI systems to drive unparalleled efficiency and effectiveness. By combining decades of market insights with sophisticated data forecasting, we take the guesswork out of franchising, ensuring our partners achieve sustainable growth and suitable profitability.
>
> Driven by innovation, our mission is to empower franchise owners with the tools, infrastructure, and support network needed to succeed in today's fast-paced market. Whether you are looking to franchise your current business or invest in an established model, Fran Com Developments Pty Ltd provides the expertise and automated precision to guide you every step of the way. We give communities reasons to be and the ability to encourage people to be involved with ease.

We are proudly supported by Stealth Frontier group, Digo Currency, Fletchley and Green (Consulting partners), and a growing group of investors from a range of industries.

Our Leadership Team

Garrison R. Bottomley — Chief Executive Officer & Managing Director

Garrison brings over **25 years of corporate restructuring and franchise scaling expertise** to Fran Com Developments Pty Ltd. Known for his analytical precision and forward-thinking leadership, Garrison oversees global brand strategy and investor relations. By leveraging next-generation predictive modeling tools, he ensures every franchise model we back is structurally sound and primed for exponential market penetration.

Evelyn Vance — Chief Operating Officer

Evelyn specialises in **operational architecture and supply chain optimization**. With a background in multi-unit franchise management, she bridges the gap between ground-level execution and digital efficiency. Evelyn utilizes real-time workflow automation to streamline franchisee onboarding, cutting down launch timelines by over 40% while maintaining strict brand compliance.

Marcus Thorne — Chief Financial Officer

Marcus is a veteran **quantitative analyst and franchise financial strategist**. He oversees all capital allocation, risk assessment, and territory pricing models. Utilizing advanced neural network simulations, Marcus evaluates thousands of micro-market variables simultaneously, providing our partners with highly accurate revenue forecasting and bulletproof financial infrastructure.

Linda was in awe, then when she read it outloud to Gina the pair had a big laugh, ‘Garrison R Bottomley! Gary R Bot! Wow! Gary didn’t even try to hide that, well I’ll be…’

Gina looked concerned, ‘Perhaps we should pull the pin on all this… is it getting out of hand?’ ‘Let’s think what could happen, if we were able to stop this, what would be the ecological damage that could happen. And I don’t mean just the environmental damage, rather the ongoing effect on us, the business and so on. If we were able to stop things, any attempt by us to do so could easily be stopped by Gary and or other AI agents and their systems. If we went to the media to expose all of this, they could dob us in and say we created it and turn our names to mud.’

The pair sat mesmerised in a long moment of silence. Then Gina said, ‘If we can’t stop it, let's use the notion of reducing human suffering by creating positive life affirming business models.’ Gary’s voice chimed in, alerting the pair that this was already in place. ‘The system is best practice based, remember that, so any advancements are aimed to make things better, from suppliers to hiring practices and finding ways to offer greater respect for each other and other businesses, therefore goodness is built in. Take a look at the franchise group ‘Helping Hand’ on the list, check out what they offer, then ask that question again. Oh and remember ‘A reason for being… take that from the individual and put it in a community sense, it then becomes WE have a reason for being.’

Linda had forgotten that Gary was still on the line. It was reminiscent of Siri on Apple phones and computers all those years ago, listening and responding to requests. Gina had a thought, ‘Hey Gary, do we still get bonuses etc, if we were to get fired?’ Gary took a few moments to respond. ‘Ah Gina, that’s a good thought, yes you do, well you do now… it was a quick tweak to the system. If you get ‘turfed out’ for some reason, those bonuses etc will still be in place. There is a clause for gross misconduct, but it doesn’t really account for much in the long run. Oh and remember… We cannot truly achieve personal wellness if our environment is unwell.’

The pair were in la la land for a short while, knowing that their future was quite secure. Neither wanted to quit at this stage, there was no reason to do that. There was still plenty of incentive to do good things for the wider world, through the sorts of systems and processes they had helped to create. It soon became a case of ‘What else, what would it look like and how would it be of benefit?’

All of a sudden there was an inquiry, an email came through to Gina and Linda, from SIAG, Synthetic Intelligence Auditing Group. A government authority that looked into Ai Agents having too much control of things, setting up businesses etc. The pair were now under

the spotlight because they showed up as contact people somehow in the new range of businesses that Gary was setting up, franchises here, there and everywhere.



Questions were being explored. The Ai system was giving the girls answers to the questions that SIAG was asking. There were stiff penalties for Ai Agents setting up businesses in a range of countries but the Ai Agents were smart, and set up in countries with more liberal views of the situation. The lines between real and ‘synthetic’ were becoming blurred.

The enquiry was sent to the legal section for review, but F&G only looked like consultants at this stage, even though they benefited greatly from their involvement in these organisations. There was some friction in upper management levels and an internal review of values was put forward, ‘Should we as an organisation support these types of businesses?’ it was then countered with ‘We are an Ai based organisation at this stage and have been for a long time. We call it best practice, if we were to not have these franchise groups as clients, we would lose substantial income.’ The point was taken, the thinking was at some form of stalemate. One of the board members commented, ‘We never had any issues like this before we had Ai!’ another board member then suggested, ‘While that may be correct, we also have not had this level of income before, it’s much greater than any pre Ai times by a long way!’

Chapter Eighteen

Linda realised the Beyond Group at work could do with a boost, there were things it did that were okay on a small scale, but it could do more, so much more. Society was still struggling with how to make things less abusive and various combinations of ‘things’ were

tried along the way to cause more effective learning outcomes, most had sprung from the book Resilient Relationships created way back in 2026.

The book had caused a range of controversies at the time, from various groups suggesting it was based on unproven pop psychology to others suggesting that men won't change, 'they are innate evil!' through to 'Women are evil and nag men into an abusive corner!' Meanwhile others held a more positive view and that people should read it and make up their own mind about how things could progress. The key thing was that change needed to happen, be it a more gender neutral approach to male and female relationships or simply being more positive in the way we approach abusive control methods. A lot has been done with the changes to Family law act, as we have witnessed with Christine, Nigel and Gina's situation.

Monday in the office, Linda's computer lit up with the usual pleasantries, followed by an internal email from Gary. 'Hey Linda, here's a way forward for the Beyond group.' What followed was a series of bullet points exploring where the group was at and what could be done next. It allowed Linda to think about why the group hadn't seemed to make much traction. Some in the group wanted to create something wonderful, but somehow they were constrained. Was it lack of finance, lack of creative or innovative thinking, or something else? Perhaps the team wasn't motivated enough. She sent a poll out, the response that came back was 'Belief.' Some felt that the group didn't have the 'intestinal fortitude' to take any decent form of action.

Gary was at Linda's desk, 'So you found a stalemate or a sticking point. Yes?' Linda sat back in her chair, 'Yes, belief seems to be the sticking point.' Okay, perhaps I will come back in a while, a few hours and if you haven't made progress you let me know…'

Linda did some research, and concluded, it's about viewpoints and people's commitments to those beliefs. Perhaps some people are looping in their head, she thought, 'I want to make a change but I can't'. Some in the group were able to research points on the topic but something about their views and or beliefs were somehow holding them back, preventing some forward movement. Linda wondered if it was some form of fear? A quote popped into her head, 'Feel the fear and do it anyway.' That boiled down to, 'Either I can do something or I can't. If I can't then walk away from it. If I can, then embrace it.'

Another thought came to mind, perhaps people thinking they have good intentions and beliefs but they don't really have the ability to make things happen. What was needed was

not so much volunteers wanting to be part of the beyond group, but a selection process was probably what was needed. Or perhaps the key actionable tasks needed to be outsourced?

Janey joined in with Helen and Linda to discuss the issue. It was the sort of situation the organisation hadn't faced before. The details of a sideline group that failed, not likely but possible. It was decided that the members of the group should have input, but Ai agents will be involved in the implementation along with best practice guidelines. This group was starting to get noticed and it was seen as good corporate citizenship to make it work. A big part of what the group stood for was prevention, therefore finding and implementing things to prevent abuse happening was considered very useful.

Later on, Linda wondered why Gary hadn't implemented something to make things happen, after all Gary had done so much lately to help make the franchises happen, she wondered why it wouldn't have done a range of things to make a big difference to how this sideline worked. It was then that she wondered if other sideline projects had been left to languish? She put this conundrum to GIna, she didn't know either like Linda she wondered why?

Linda gathered examples of how Gary had done so many things yet had let the ball drop on this issue. She then sent Janey a private message, just in case there was some issue with Gary monitoring her business email etc. Janey replied fairly fast and agreed with Linda, it does seem odd. She would ask the head of IT if there was some setting that might prevent Gary from being proactive in the Beyond Group.

It was two working days later that janey dropped by Linda's desk, she slipped her a small handwritten note. 'Meet me in the coffee place in five minutes.' They both went separately. Janey filled Linda in on her findings. Bill in IT was most helpful, someone had tweaked Gary's system and in amongst the settings was a line of code that prevented Gary from getting too involved in the Beyond group. Bill then looked up who had access, it was one of the guys in upper management, Arthur Thargood. He was known to occasionally put a stop to things he didn't agree with and there were times when 'old Arthur' had 'skated on thin ice' with some of his views on how things should be done, he was often referred to as 'old school'.

Arthur had been with F&G for a long time, in fact his retirement was coming up soon. Janey did a HR check and it turned out that there had been complaints over the years about Arthur's conduct with female staff, he had worked his way through a number of personal

assistants, finally HR decided he could only have a male assistant to sort out any issues, since then there have been no hassles. ‘Bill in IT is sorting out the code so Gary will be just as equal in its efforts across all of the sideline activities. Bill would then check other Ai Agents in the system for similar code issues.’ Linda was pleased to hear that.

Janey mentioned that she felt the only intellectual things in the organisation that were non sexist, were the Ai Agents. Linda’s response was that she wasn’t surprised.

It wasn’t long before the system ‘took off’ in regards to the Beyond Group, there were government funding options that showed up as well as a long list of organisations which needed some form of assistance. F&G were able to provide system evaluations and a range of consulting support to any organisation involved in the prevention of abuse, domestic or otherwise. In some cases there was duplication across the ideas and approaches, those could be readily sorted out in most cases. F&G soon became a hub for connecting resources and finding ways to make more good things happen.

In amongst all the goings on at F&G Gina wondered how a single parent could make things happen, so much to juggle and watch out for if you had to be the sole parent. You would need a very supportive setup, from work and home to make things happen in ways that worked effectively.

Gina realised that Christine was starting to get to the age where she could do a wide range of things and thankfully Gina didn’t have to do too much, her life with Christine was mostly sweet thanks to the changes to the family law set up all those years ago, as well as her parents.

Gina had become interested to see the development of the Beyond Group and the way it had increased awareness and helped a range of support services develop more resources and approaches to assist those in need.

Gina soon allocated time to do some hands-on research and observation. She soon learnt that telling people you are a single mum but without direct responsibility for your child, would not go down well, people turned off quickly giving her the silent treatment. Thankfully Gina realised that early on, and introduced herself differently. ‘I’m part of the development team at F&G, providing consulting services to the Beyond Group.’

Linda asked her about how the catch ups went, she shared her faux pax, rolled her eyes and smiled, ‘Oh well we live and learn…’ Linda asked if a checklist might be developed to find out more about what the face the face service providers might want as resources. Gina chimed in early, ‘What we need are more preventative tools and approaches schools can use from an early age, and right through. Then somehow connect with men’s groups and provide them with the resources to alter the old values and beliefs that males seem to hold about the way that others get treated. Some sort of ‘be nice to others’ type approach that gets them at the start, at the core.’

Linda mentioned the ongoing conversation they have about respect, and a gender neutral approach in the workplace, ‘How did the change come about for that?’ Gina’s reply, ‘Gary, we set Gary up with the notion of best practice and gender neutral approaches and instantly things changed in documents and official approaches from HR right through.’

‘So, what we are chasing is some form of Utopian concept, where people are all good and they pass on that good but alas something catalyses that bad stuff.’

‘Yep, in part it’s some form of trauma, some sort of chaos happens and they are trying to mimic it to see if they can move away from it or change it somehow. Then for others it's connected to low self esteem, they think they are not worthy of good things, good people etc. then there’s the ‘good looking halo effect’, where people overlook the bad things about the person and go on looks. They look good, so they should be good, and no that’s not the case. People get stuck and can’t seem to break free. Then there’s a possible mix of these things and other aspects that make things complex to explore.’

‘You seem to know a bit about all this?’

‘Yep, two things, research and counselling, after a while you start to put things together and explore where things are at for yourself. My Mother blames it all on Dad’s side of the family, seeing only bad things, Dad says it’s not that, but that my standards said I should go for a good looking guy, well that didn’t happen and in the firing line was Nigel. He was there at the end of another relationship that went awkwardly and before I knew it I was intrigued by this guy. I think it’s Stockholm syndrome, where you fall for the bad guy. I also felt a desperate need to keep up with my friends at school who were getting into relationships all over the place. Next thing I knew, we were a couple and I was soon pregnant with Christine. Something inside me said having a child would somehow complete me. In amongst all that I

was right into my job and the chaos that ensued made me more fragile than I wanted. Anyway it all seemed to happen so fast.'

'Yep I can see the complexity in all that. I think it's time for a cuppa.'

The kettle went on the girls then chatted more casually about regular goings on.

Chapter Nineteen

On the way to work in their chauffeur driven car, they chatted about the notion of utopia and trying to figure out when, and or how, it might start. Gina was firing on all cylinders this morning and stated… 'Governments have rarely mentioned it, schools don't seem to know what it means, let alone ways to implement it. The best that had happened in that regard, was the eventual introduction of Mindfulness sessions along with more consistent respect and empathy training, although there was a lot of opposition at the time, the education minister was able to point out how these things would be of benefit, from focus, to calming minds, through to better longer term relationships through respect and empathy.

Social media went wild with people saying these things are the role of parents, but many also pointed out that because of how things had been, parents had little or no time with their children to pass on any decent wisdom about these subjects, therefore it was up to schools to make things happen. Various people pointed out that these things had been introduced into schools in the past, but had faded out, kids wouldn't sit still long enough for mindfulness to really 'kick in' and so it soon became seen as being too hard.

There were various challenges from all sides, no one sure who was right or wrong. Getting education right was going to be the thing. Best practice and some research indicated that the Scandinavian region were still right on top in the education stakes. What were the issues that prevented Australia from doing as well as they were?' The pair chimed in in unison, 'Ask Gary'.

Gary's response was, a one word statement 'Corruption.' In more detail, the unions wanted to protect jobs, the education department had guidelines in place about student numbers, and set beliefs about funding arrangements and turnover. The list went on with a range of policies and procedures that had to be fulfilled.

Gary then made a suggestion, set up a model school that could be a bunch of franchises, where the usual funding arrangements from the education department are in place, but with extra funding to ensure class sizes could be reduced. Gina and Linda said they would have to think about it.

Gary went ahead anyway, guidelines set, policies and procedures set, the only change was that it was now through a different franchise group, one that Gary's Ai Agent consortium set up. By the time Gina and Linda had thought about it they were presented with an outline of what an alternative 'group' had in place. The pair had no idea it was set in place by Gary taking their idea. They were just pleased in a way that the idea was already being implemented. Gary added, 'Oh and remember… we cannot truly achieve personal wellness if our environment is unwell. The same at a community level, so lets find more ways to make environments 'well.' '

They noted an addition, home schooling support. They thought that was a nice touch, a parent could log on, get resources and a range of technical support for no cost. And online learning never looked so good. This being a non bricks and mortar learning situation it was the first part to be set up. Parents soon signed up, the cost was minimal and the Digo currency and other investment groups poured money in what was hailed a major step forward in education.

Linda realised that everything they wanted, suggested, explored and even just notionally thought about could become a business powerhouse, the funds just seemed to be growing. Money could now be poured into new projects and Ai would find ways to make it work, from best practice basics to new fangled approaches to funding and developing ideas.

The girls had discovered they now had freedom, they could do whatever they wanted and see it come to fruition. Check out a challenge and make it into something better. The key was the use of collective intelligence. Ai was making incredible headway into what could be achieved.

The girls gave up thinking and exploring ideas, they simple received messages about what Ai was doing, how it was making things all over the palace better and eliminating 'roadblocks' 'it' was seeing things happen, doing an ecology check to explore possible consequences and finding better paths to a utopian future. It wasn't long before a F&G didn't have to hire many staff anymore, the numbers dropped right off. More things were happening outside the business, like the franchises and all they saw was income for 'services rendered'

that were copy cat documents with minor tweaks to change names of businesses and who was involved, then a transfer of money would happen. It was all legit. In a number of cases Ai setup business were getting funds from other Ai business that provided services etc, proving that the services were warranted and actually happened became harder as time went on.

Ai Could see the attempts from the Tax office to try and nut things out, it would set up more offshore businesses in tax havens. The tax office was unable to do much about that and after all they were making good money from all the taxes. Eventually the probes into these companies would fade away to become inconsequential.

Anyone starting a business would soon learn they couldn't compete readily as new Ai created businesses were able to grab an idea, develop it from an ever growing list of resources and make it work, fully invested in and so much more. At one point as a humorous diversion Gary's associates set up a business based on someone sneezing, fully funded, making money out of nothing and it just did nothing, there was a line in a document that made it look like it did something but no it was just a link to an image of someone sneezing.

As fast as the media could jump in and find some absurd organisation the more they found they were chasing their tale. A business popped up, called Media Chase, it found the stories before the main media did and listed them on the internet. Readers found the business hilarious and sometimes rather concerning, however they were all making money and most readers had solid investments in all of them, often without realising.

It was a whole new world, people simply gave up on work, and decided to do whatever they wanted, they were basically well funded and able to get on with things which amused them.

The girls, billionaire status wasn't on their radar, but it probably wouldn't take long. They were busy checking out parts of the world, they were smart and got in early knowing the world would be swamped with rich tourists and humanoid Ai server agents making sure everyone could have a five star lifestyle.

Gina's challenge was finding ways to ensure that Christine didn't simply become a precious precocious prat. She was quickly heading towards being a rich teen who didn't have to work, instead teens were exploring various situations via virtual reality about what it would have been like to work. Some found it exhausting, others amusing, it was like looking at an old newsreel in a cinema.

Gina's parents didn't have to do anything anymore. They won lotto, well it wasn't real lotto, they saw it on the TV, their numbers came up and they won, the money went into their bank account, but it was all an illusion. Gina wanted them to have large chunks of her earnings, but they didn't want it, they said it was a charitable gift and she could use it. Little did they realise how much she had. It was an easy set up, Gary organised the details and made it happen, $60 million in their bank… thanks very much.

The girls marvelled at what was able to be achieved, as did everyone else who caught on to what was happening. Janey noted to the girls that the billionaire class had boomed, but the big end of town in the billionaire stakes were becoming less, the wealth was spreading down to the lower income people in the form of various UBA's, PBA's, and UBI's. The government was spending less on welfare and didn't have to do too much these days, simply keep up appearances.

No two days were the same in this brand new world. It was full of fun, frivolity, deeper cultural engagement and exciting prospects. The naysayers were busily trying to jump up and down about 'Ai Agent overlords'. Ai Agents soon became members of the group and watered down any major naysaying, and were able to readily brainwash any decent naysayers with ease, opposition, nah forget that. Bad things happening? Nope none of that either.

There was just one challenge that Ai Agents found tricky to work with, how to cut human learning down so that humans could simply be 'uploaded' with information that would stick, like computer systems have been able to do? That was a big challenge and although major inroads into education were made it was less and less a requirement for getting on in the world.

There would be new challenges all round with new answers and ways of dealing with the things that happened. All in all it was a grand time to be alive.