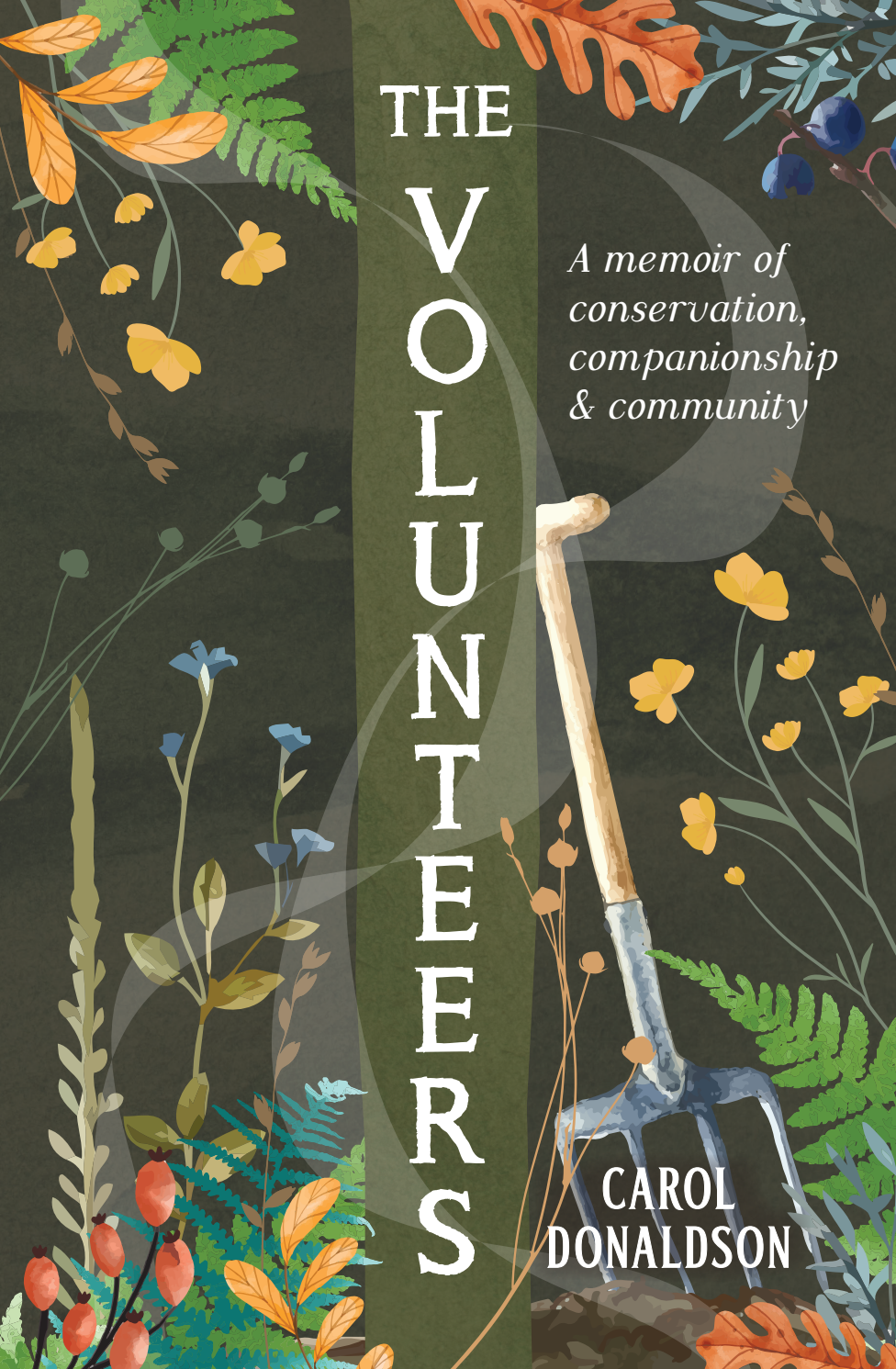
THE VOLUNTEERS

A memoir of conservation, companionship & community



CAROL DONALDSON

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Author's Note

Some names and descriptions have
been changed to protect identities

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PROLOGUE

The smell of smoke drifted across the clearing. It ghost-gathered, hanging like a spectre amid the birches, glowing brightly in the pared-down winter palette of the woods. There was Roy, flapping away at the fire with a biscuit-tin lid, trying to get air to the flames. He tackled most things in life with the same boyish enthusiasm, despite now being in his sixties. Embers flew and alighted on his fleece, adding yet more perforations to the garment that already looked like it had been eaten away by moths. Meg stood on the opposite side, cutting the huge pile of brash into neat chunks, laying each branch carefully on the fire. She was our oldest member but showed no let-up in her fitness either.

"Butts and tips, tips and butts," Roy reminded her as the branches were laid first one way, then the other. Meg didn't need telling – she was a naturally neat woman and knew how to lay a fire as well as anyone – but Roy meant no harm. Butts and tips was an in-joke; there were lots of them among the volunteers. Jim emerged carrying a huge bundle of bramble on a pitchfork and dumped the lot of it in the centre of the fire, sending a rush of flames into the air and scattering the neatly assembled pile. Jim's mop of white hair glowed from the heat but his luxuriant eyebrows always seemed to escape the flames unscathed.

"Just pile it on," he said. "Once the fire's got to this stage it will burn through anything."

Roy didn't protest. We all knew Jim was right – he usually was. Jim had a natural authority but, unlike some of the other volunteers, he didn't try to take charge. He didn't need to, he only had to chip in a word or two of advice from the sidelines to make me reconsider my approach. I knew by now that Jim's advice was worth listening to.

Josie and Kit, our youngest members, appeared from a thicket of scrub, dragging a huge pile of branches. Josie leaned back against the weight of the tangle, tugging away – she loved nothing better than pitting her strength against an ensnared bundle of bramble. Kit was the same; I knew by now when he was swinging an axe or a scythe he was in his happy place. The pair of them were laughing and stumbling over the rough ground. It was a world away from the morose, closed-off youths they had first appeared to be when they had joined. When they were in their early twenties, Josie had hidden away from life and Kit had dismissed the world as not worth bothering with. Now, it seemed, they had forgotten themselves and looked like they were having fun.

"Don't just pull those branches, cut them up," Val instructed the pair. "Josie, put a long-sleeved shirt on or you'll get a thorn in your arm and end up with blood poisoning." Val was right, blackthorn had ferocious spikes that could cause infection. She looked down at Roy who was now blowing vigorously into the base of the fire. "Roy, stop breathing in all that smoke, your lungs are damaged enough." Val had been a nurse for many years and still expected her orders to be followed. She struggled to rein in the impulse to take charge. I sympathised, knowing I could be the same. We were both natural bosses and, maybe because of this, we respected and liked each other. Val's great virtue was that she could laugh at her foibles and apologise when she knew she had gone too far. I watched her now as she shot a glance at Bevan, who was leaning on the fire fork, chatting.

Bevan often appeared to do more talking than working. He was a natural people person, which seemed to me at odds with his former life as an accountant. He was also a master of uncovering a person's

life story and would usually find out all the background information on a new group member in 10 minutes flat. Bevan's own life story was less on display; his buddy Jim probably knew all the facts, but Jim was no gossip and was not about to tell. Meg said they had a bromance. The men in the group had supported each other through life's knocks in the undemonstrative way that men do.

Esther and Wayland were bundling up piles of long straight poles, tying each with twine so they could be hauled away and stored. I hoped they wouldn't get arrested at the weekend when they were going on another Greenpeace protest against fracking. They weren't reckless but, if it came to it, were quite willing to put their liberty at risk for a cause they believed in.

The light was leaving us, sinking rose gold beneath the bare trees. As the sun lowered, it bronzed the bracken and beech leaves, firing them into life, the rich colour of chestnut ponies. Spider webs hung from the bracken fronds, each one backlit, tinselling the woodlands in the run-up to Christmas. Winter momentarily softened and was kind before the coming of the night.

Our work was part of a cycle of management that had taken place for hundreds of years in these woods. We coppiced the hazel trees, cutting the stems down to the ground to make use of the tall poles that would regrow in a few years' time. Next year, this part of the wood, flooded with light, would be alive with bluebells – but would I be there to see it?

The scene could have been part of another century, resembling a Brueghel painting of peasants at work in the woods. If those peasants could have stepped into this clearing they would have felt quite at home. There was the same chatter as we worked beside each other, the same tools, wooden handled and fired metal. Our clothes,

patched, bagged and smoke smeared, were not so very different. We were part of the woods, as they had been, rooted in this landscape in a way that can only happen when you work on the land and meet it on its terms.

A crow called overhead and somewhere up above, a buzzard mewed. I felt that happiness wash over me that I could never quite pin down; the happiness that comes from working outdoors with your hands alongside your friends, doing something that feels worthwhile.

I loved being part of the volunteer gang. I loved being their leader. After six years of working alongside this group of characters, my love for them was so big that it swelled up inside me. We had been there for each other in a way I never would have expected when I took the job in a panic as my life hit the buffers and the money ran out. With my family and my friends far away, the volunteers had come into my life and filled that void. The group had become something much more than a job. It was a fundamental part of my happiness. All of it, the physicality, the connection to nature, the laughter, the in-jokes, even the slight annoyances that were bound to arise when you spent time with a bunch of strong-minded individuals. I couldn't picture life without these people, and I knew that the group meant something of equal importance to each one of its members. With some I could only guess at what that void had been in their own lives; with others they had opened up and told me. We all need something, don't we? Whether you are 21 or 79 we all need the same things. Friends, support, acceptance, a sense of belonging, a feeling of purpose. Outside, in the real world, everyone was so busy and rushed and absorbed with their own lives that these things could be hard to find, but inside, with the volunteers, we had time

for each other and the patience to get to know the person beneath the exterior.

Now though, things had changed. A chance had risen up before me that I had to take. Nothing comes without loss, I told myself, but how was I to leave behind this community that I had helped to create? How would I say goodbye to these people who had become necessary to me in a way I hadn't expected?

"Tea's up," I shouted. The others downed tools and wandered across to where the mugs were lined up; orders I knew by heart, already served. Not yet, I told myself. I have this for a little longer, the decision doesn't have to be made yet.