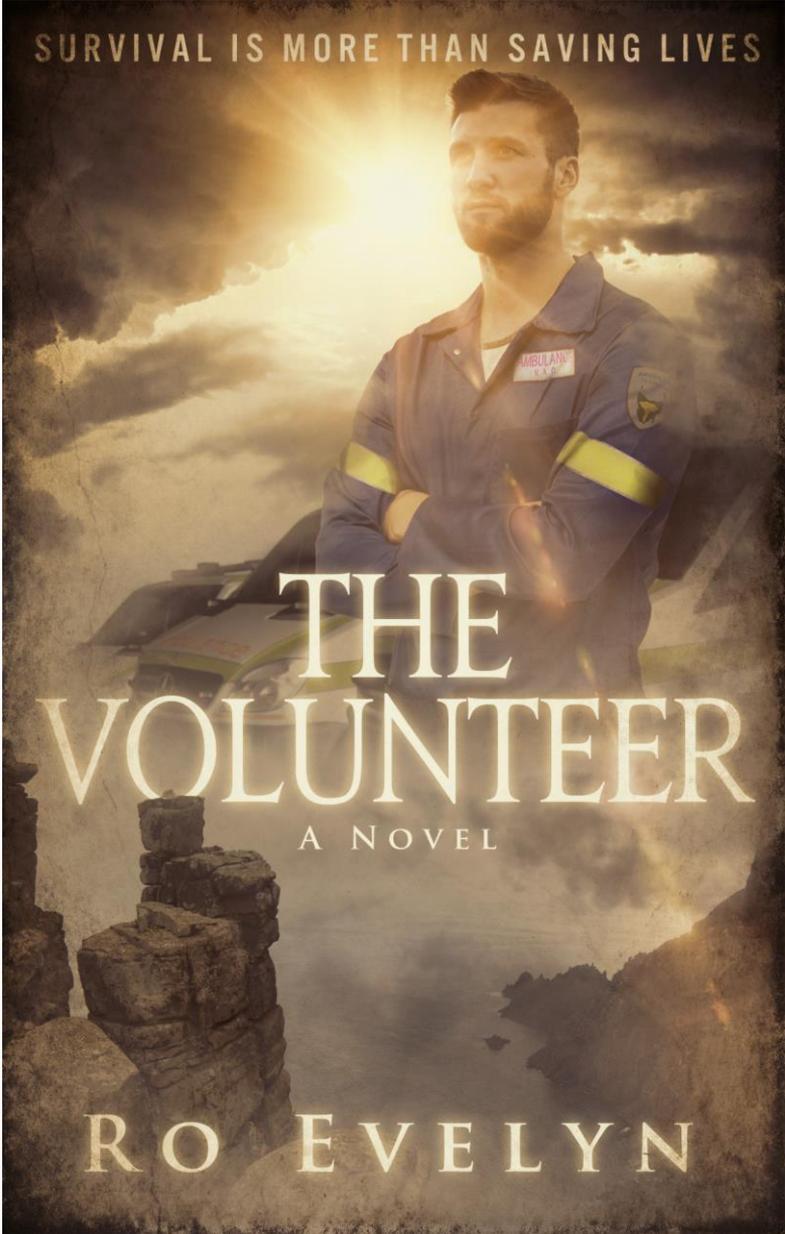


SURVIVAL IS MORE THAN SAVING LIVES



THE
VOLUNTEER

A NOVEL

RO EVELYN

THE VOLUNTEER

A Novel

R o E v e l y n



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*For the Amb-belles
Dianne, Margaret & Lorraine*

And all those who volunteer their time and skills

Chapter One

Sunday afternoon

I was in trouble. Real trouble. My downfall was predicted in the pile of unpaid bills on the table. I'd set up a blackboard in the lounge to explore my options and the numbers added up to the same inevitable, inescapable conclusion. I, Andrew Sutton, was bankrupt.

There was a way out. Barely an hour ago I'd had a genuine offer on the place. I could sell my beach shack and laundry business here in Howling Inlet and my financial problems would be solved.

As easy as that.

Yet, as I sat at the kitchen table, I savoured the idea of going down. I'd rather cast my lot in with the hundreds of maritime wrecks along this part of the coast. For once in my life I could face the challenge, weather the consequences. I could be a captain going down with his ship.

It wasn't my pride that resisted the lifeline. Hell, no. There was something far more important to me than self-respect and I had five minutes to decide.

I got up from the table and paced across the living room. Six o'clock was the deadline. Sell or not. Tick or tock. Which ruin did I prefer?

'Lori. Forgive me.'

Especially today.

The living room was just as my Lori had left it. An assortment of stuffed sofas, rag rugs and calico cushions were seemingly frozen in some thickened, yellowed resin of my own making. My collection of rocks mute among her books and my travel pictures moulded among her china, all freeze-framed into unbearable, immovable silence.

And me, just as inert without her.

It was the memories that kept me going. The play of fire in her black opal eyes, the amusement in her Revlon *Ravish Me Red* lips. Those keepsakes outshone any of the precious stones on my shelf and this was the life, this was the place she had chosen, and to lose it promised to tear the last of her from me. We had been at one here. We'd marvelled together at the voices in the wind and her imagination tingled with mine at the natural secrets of the place.

The light level dropped. I predicted a storm coming onto the coast from the west and, as I crossed the floor, I watched the water of the inlet grow opaque and flecked with foam. All afternoon the wind had pushed in from the north, turning boats against their moorings and sending breakers in hard along the old sea wall. Behind the wall the scarified pines darkened against a thread of shops that bore the brunt of every westerly onslaught.

Howling Inlet was a smudge on the Tasmanian map and, with each passing winter, it submitted to the forces it was subjected to. Usually the weather. Our inlet was not named after eminent Dutch, French or British explorers like our neighbours were but after the harrowing sound of the wind straight in from southern oceans.

But those external forces were expected, predictable. Others were not. Like the closure of the fish processing plant and the payout of contractors in the native forest industry. Most

of those who still lived in Howling were either too stubborn to leave or had rarely been beyond the confines of the narrow coast. I was not the only one in financial difficulty and I knew my situation was being repeated in rural towns across my island state, across Australia, maybe even across all western countries.

But my reasons for wanting to be here were very different from those who had decided to stay. It was not only what I had lost but what I had discovered that kept me here.

With the sudden lack of light the interior of our barely liveable shack was etched onto the glass of the living room windows. Years of wind and salt had pitted the exterior surface, making any reflected image a run of disjointed parts and skewed lines.

I was startled to see my daughter's reflection in the window. That same skew and disjointedness in the glass ran across her outline as she came in from the kitchen. Her black, straightened hair had an off-centre kink as it merged with the deep opalescence of her eyes. They were just like her mother's but without the lustre. Dim and undone. I'd thought she was down on the beach, immersed in her tales of shipwreck and loss, and the recent mystery of a local woman gone missing.

'You're going to do it, aren't you?' she said. She had a flat, unsurprised way of speaking so it didn't sound like a question or an accusation, though I took it as both. 'How could you?'

I stared at her in the glass. Petrea had inherited my love of the outdoors and, unlike her classmates who sought a life vicariously through the internet, she loved her life among the cliffs of the inlet. She seemed to draw as much nourishment from the tumult in the environment outside as I did. She knew this decision was coming; she also understood what it meant for her and the broader community.

I was selling off more than real estate.

‘This’s what Mum wanted,’ she said, indicating the room around her with quick jabs of her hand. ‘You can’t throw it away. Not to him. Not today.’

I stared at her reflection until she stormed into the kitchen and I heard the back door slam.

Despite my grandstanding to the contrary, I knew I would sell. I’d given my word in a rash grab at relief because it was the sensible and logical thing to do. The buyer’s offer may be my only opportunity to sell, and with each new month the amount I owed careered further into the red. I wouldn’t have to juggle debts between agencies or mollify creditors or beg to keep utilities connected.

Then there was the look on my daughter’s face.

And me living with this decision.

It was six o’clock and the phone rang. My hand hovered above the phone until the very last moment before the call would redirect to the answering machine. I counted.

It was my buyer. Stan Rule. The voice of local commercial radio.

‘Andrew, I know what you’re going to say and I understand completely. I heard what happened to your wife and I feel for you, I really do. Decisions like this are never easy but I know you’ll consider all the variables, make the right decision, as hard as it is.’

His voice was all smooth vowels and crisp consonants. Commander of the regional airwaves and chief of local public opinion.

‘Ah...’

‘Nothing’s too difficult for me, believe me. By all reports your word is good. I’ll have my solicitor draw up the papers.’

Even with my desperate need right there on the board in front of me, I still couldn’t sort the crowd of competing thoughts.

‘I think we understand each other—what we’ve gone through,’ he continued when I didn’t speak. ‘I can have your money to you tomorrow. Is that soon enough?’

I took a deep breath. ‘Look, Mr Rule it’s a generous offer and I appreciate it but—’

‘Stan. Definitely Stan. You better believe it’s a generous offer, it’s a fantastic offer and you’ll never get another one like it.’

‘Agree. Totally. But—’

‘You think I’m not giving you a fair deal?’

‘A great deal. It’s just that—’

‘You think Stan Rule cheats his business partners? Is that what you think? You drive a hard bargain, Andrew old son. Another five thou. Is that generous or what?’

‘But this place’s not worth—’

‘Haggling over a few lousy grand. I agree. Grief changes you, doesn’t it? What I wouldn’t give to have my Eliza back. I’ll make sure this matter’s finalised tomorrow. A sensible decision. You won’t regret this.’

Rule cut the connection.

I stood at the window by the phone, crestfallen at how easily I’d given over. I would regret it. There was absolutely no doubt I would.

I stared disconsolately out across the inlet. Above the town was Howling Rock. The Rock was, in my geo-speak, a columnar dolerite intrusion of the Jurassic era. Towering stacks of grey dolerite whose rectangular edges had rounded and fractured through millennia of weathering looked like a single structure from a distance. For those in the Inlet, how the Rock looked from day-to-day was a barometer of their lives—from what the weather would bring on them that day to more predictive, superstitious notions of fate.

A shadow passed across the Rock, darkening its crumbling face and accentuating the stress lines deepened by the inexorable power of water. The darkness spread across the ridge where Stan Rule lived in his elevated hideaway then passed through the town to where I was. If what I could see outside meant anything, my future was pessimistic indeed.

Not that I had to break the news of my defection just yet. Hell, no. Why would I want to add community scorn to one of my already black days?

I went out into the tiny laundromat adjoining the house to finish folding the towels for the caravan park. I ached to be out in contact with that which had brought Lori and I such joy, but it was Sunday and I expected more work tomorrow after the holiday units had been vacated. My laundromat was tiny by city standards and only had enough floor space for two commercial Speed Queen washers, a Maytag dryer and a chair to sit on while you waited. Not only was the laundry my bread and butter but handling linen gave me something to do, gave me something positive to think about.

The first roll of thunder shook the frame of the laundry window. As the wind picked up, loose iron on the roof screeched and made that tortuous sound of metal lifting. I was absorbed by the misery of the day until I was aware of a high-pitched *squeal* near my hip. I carried a pager in a holster on my belt and it was new enough to bewilder me each time it went off.

I pulled the pager out of the holster and pressed to read the message.

I was, just as surprisingly to myself as everyone else in town, an ambulance officer. One of the six hundred or so volunteers who outnumbered the paid paramedics three-to-one in providing our island state's emergency service. I was Howling Inlet's latest and, possibly, last recruit.

The message from our dispatch, SOC or Comms as we still stubbornly referred to it, came in a distinct order. Address was a priority and, as sometimes happened like now, was all the information I got. The pager data cut out after the location, this time ‘Seaview Drive’, and I fumbled in my shirt for my mobile to phone my offsider. Craig was on tonight and he would have the details but there was always that overwhelming urge to know what I was going to.

I speed-dialled Craig.

‘Comin’,’ he shouted above the clatter of a diesel motor.

‘What have we got? Didn’t get it all.’

‘It’s Mrs D.’

All that told me was how fast he’d get here, which I already knew. He would respond immediately to any call despite the classification given by Comms and Dorothy MacIntyre was a Very Important Person in terms of the Inlet and a Very Very Important Person in terms of our local ambulance crew. Our number one fan, you could say.

Craig would be gunning our ambulance—a sleek, steep-nosed Mercedes Benz *Sprinter* van numbered 1734—from his dad’s garage in the centre of town. I lived near the caravan park, which was just around the corner and up the hill from there, so I had less than two minutes to get my gear on.

My coveralls hung over my bedroom door. Boots, fleece jacket and equipment belt were just inside the door. The navy blue uniform could be pulled on over what I wore and, judging by the way the tea-tree branches slapped the bedroom window, I needed to prepare for the Antarctic.

When I reached for the house keys on the dresser the visibility gear flashed in the mirror of the wardrobe. The stripes around my body at chest and knee height made me look like I’d been run over by a line marker. I hesitated at my own reflection. It never ceased to amaze me how much physical and emotional

substance the uniform gave me. I was transformed from a slightly scruffy, soft-about-the-edges, financial bankrupt to a five-foot-ten ambulance officer.

That was only appearance, of course. I didn't join the ambulance service thinking I was brave or capable. More out of desperation to keep in contact with the human race. More out of Craig's tap-dripping persistence and out of gratitude for what the other volunteers had done for my wife while she'd been ill, then for Petrea as she struggled to accept my wife's passing.

My hair gave my true identity away. Always unruly and neither blond nor brown. I reached for my beanie to squash over it.

I heard the ambulance a second before its lights and grill filled my bedroom window. In a land of perpetual shadows, the ambulance was glistening white and plastered with fluorescent stripes of orange and lime with high-visibility chevrons on the rear doors. The insignia on the grill meant dominance of the environment around it, and the Sprinter certainly was a prominent figure in a town that was as split as the coastline was by Howling Inlet. The ambulance and the town against Stan Rule and his mountain.

For those who mattered to me I had just sided with the enemy.