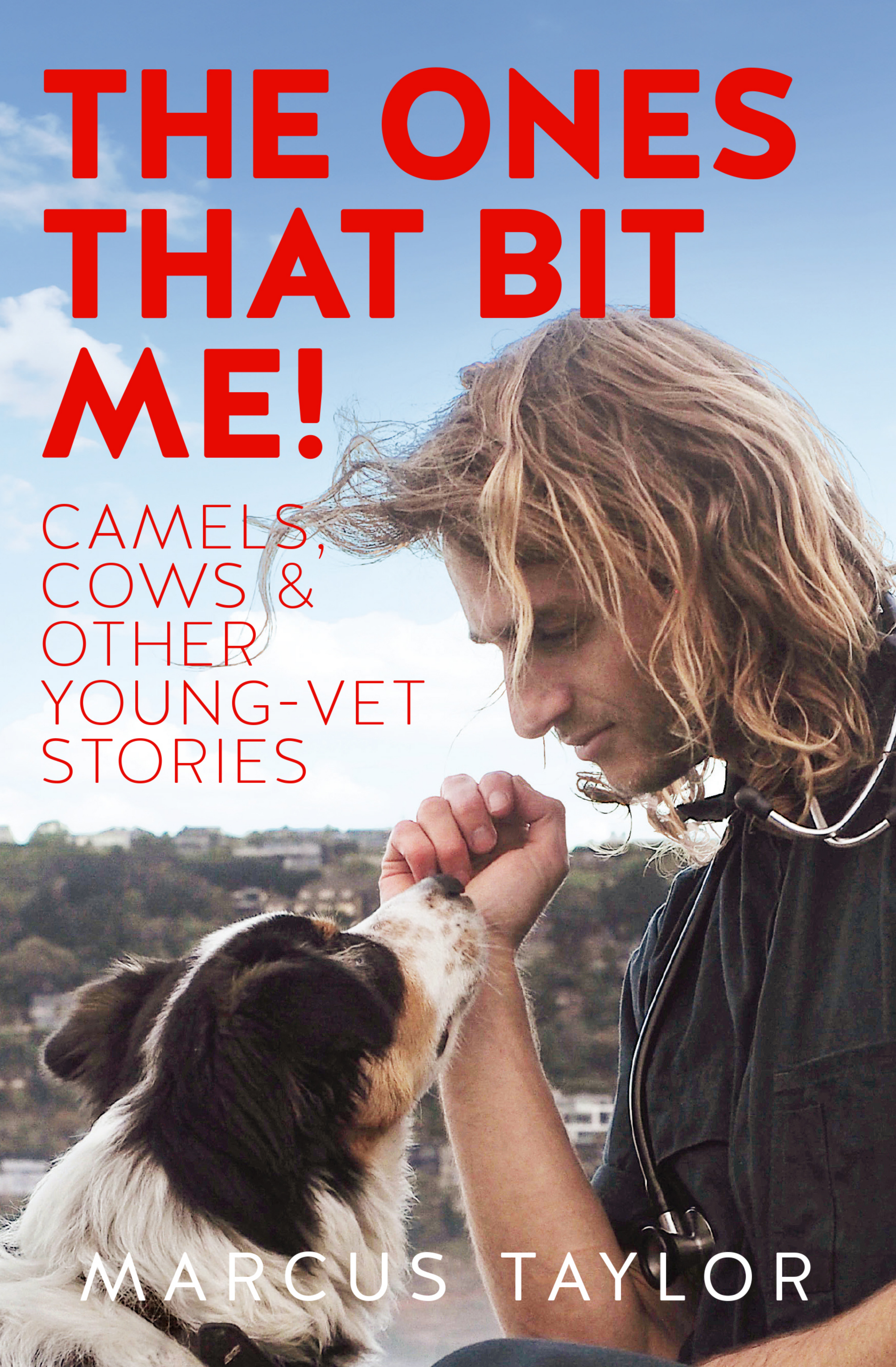
THE ONES THAT BIT ME!

CAMELS, COWS & OTHER YOUNG-VET STORIES



MARCUS TAYLOR

THE ONES THAT BIT ME!

MARCUS TAYLOR

THE ONES THAT BIT ME!

CAMELS, COWS & OTHER YOUNG-VET STORIES

MASSEY
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The names of people and some locations have been altered, and in rare instances the details of different cases have been merged to protect the privacy of those involved. However, the details and the events described remain as the author recalls them.

This book is dedicated to my sister, who encouraged me to start it, and to my wife, whose love and support allowed me to finish it.

CONTENTS

PREFACE

IT ALL BEGAN WITH A TURKEY. We stood eye-to-eye, locked in a toddler–bird standoff. I was three years old, so we were of equal intelligence, but the turkey had an edge. I wanted to flick his gobbley little neck and make it wobble. He wanted me to go away. I toddled towards him. He raised his head, gaining a height advantage but exposing his flappy neck, the object of my wonder. I made my move but before my hand had gone an inch he struck. *TAP! TAP! TAP!* Three sharp pecks to the forehead, and I toppled onto my backside, screaming in outrage. A decisive defeat.

On a family trip to Australia a few years later, I plucked a blue-green, glass-eyed lizard from a rock and clasped it in my hand. With primal speed, the agitated reptile twisted in my hands, clamping her jaws onto my finger. I ran shrieking to my parents, the lizard still dangling from my hand.

Later that year, back home in New Zealand, I tangled with a colossal longfin eel, shimmering and black, monstrous yet elegant. She must have been 80 years old. She twisted at the river's edge, tangled among dozens of other eels looking for food. I leaned down and put my hand in the water. One hungry chomp later and my blood filled the stream, sending the swarming eels into a frenzy.

The next year, we took our annual holiday at a deep-green lake nestled between mountains on the West Coast.

My fingers were dusted with sugary powder after a leisurely marshmallow-toasting session when a dragonfly so large that he belonged in *King Kong* choppered down to land on my hand. I was enchanted by his black-and-yellow colouring and bulbous eyes. I held still, revelling in my apparent abilities as an animal-whisperer. Here I was in a remote wilderness, attracting beautiful creatures. The small dragon crept his way towards my fingertips, pausing at the sugar. That's it: explore, friend. When his jaws locked down, piercing skin and flesh, my scream echoed across the lake . . .

By the time I had graduated from veterinary school at the age of 23, a sheep, a cow, a hawk, innumerable dogs, cats, parrots and even a territorial fish had locked their mandibles onto my flesh. Every bite only intrigued me further. The wonderful creatures with which we share this planet have never stopped filling me with awe, and it is for them that I've written this book about my adventures as a vet.

CHAPTER ONE

WRESTLING THE MOON COW

I KICKED OFF MY GUMBOOTS and pushed the front door open with my elbow, not wanting to dirty the handle. My day in the trenches had left me covered in every manner of excreta; my aroma arrived home before I did. The main female in my life came racing to meet me in the hallway, fascinated and ready to spend as long as I'd allow her sniffing my sleeves, arms and face. I was a house cat's dream. Unfortunately, my human roommates were not as thrilled.

Here was my dilemma: I was on call. If I didn't shower, chances were I wouldn't be called out and I'd have stayed stinky for no reason. But, invariably, every time I showered when I was on call — *Ding!* — the ominous toll of my work phone sounded.

The evening of the 'moon-cow wrestling' would be one of those unfortunate occasions.

Ding!

> Cow down in paddock,
> difficulty calving.

Just from the text, I knew I was in for a tough night. The cow was in distress — and she was also not on her feet. When a pregnant cow is lying down, there is less space to work with inside the uterus, making it harder to extricate the calf, meaning I'd have to work either sitting or lying on the ground, in knee-deep mud. So it was with some apprehension that I climbed into my truck, my hair dripping, and smelling like a soap shop.

Soon the wide roads of Canterbury were disappearing behind me as the spring sun dipped behind the Southern Alps. The contrast to my life of two weeks earlier was stark. Then, I had been wandering the streets of Lisbon, drinking red wine with a gorgeous woman named Lila whose sand-blonde hair fell in loose curls, framing her wide blue eyes. Chasing her had felt like trying to catch a speck of dust floating in a beam of light. Every time I got close, she danced away. I sighed and hoped the calf wouldn't be as tricky to pin down.

By the time I pulled into the hedge-rimmed paddock the sun had finished its lazy fall behind the mountains. Twilight was setting in. A stubby older chap in mud-stained overalls waved me over. His grey hair was short and there was stubble on his weathered cheeks. There are many like him in New Zealand — but none the same — archetypal hard-working Kiwis who walk their paddocks at all hours, making sure their animals are safe, and who grind away at the seemingly endless list of tasks on the farm before finally heading home to dinner and the fireplace.

The farmer looked troubled and seemed jumpy as he

made his way over to my truck, confirming my fears that this might not be a run-of-the-mill call-out.

'Sheza-goer. She'll go ya, shehwill!' His rapid-fire sentences blended words into a language of their own.

'Dahryt?' I answered, grateful that I'd grown up close enough to farm gates to pick up an ear for this unique dialect.

'Yep, shezhaddacrackahme, o'll tell ya. A reeeal goer,' he warned.

Translation: She attacked me, so look out.

The farmer's eyes were wide, and there was a tremor in his voice. Given his obvious years of farming experience, this anxiety surprised me.

I turned my attention to the cow. Her head was turned back in our direction, and she was glaring at us. Her eyes were wild, and her head twitched. Ketosis. A condition that occurs when an animal's blood sugar is very low, it can send cattle into a hyperactive, aggressive frenzy. Prolonged labour, like the kind this cow was experiencing, is a common cause.

Even from where I was standing, I could see the nose of her partially born calf sticking out of her back end, and it didn't look like it was moving in a hurry. I paused to consider my options. None of them looked great.

To my astonishment, I realised my companion was already creeping like a midnight assassin towards the nervous cow. I hadn't even had time to grab my rope. Left with little choice, I joined him, planning to time my dash along with his. We would jump on her head and immobilise

her before she could get to her feet and charge us. I moved towards the cow, creeping a little faster to catch up with the farmer. Again, I underestimated his eagerness. Within seconds, he had dashed ahead of me and leapt onto the cow with full gusto.

'HEAWEGO!' he bellowed.

The panicked cow thrashed her head from side to side as he landed on her muscular neck. Head-to-head the two struggled before she managed to toss him off, flailing like a doll. He pounced back. Most people would have considered surrendering at this point, but this warrior had 60 years' worth of farmer strength and resilience to call on. I ran as fast as I could towards the manic scene. He held on tight, and seconds later I joined the fray.

'GEDDER!' he cried, as I landed half on him and half on the cow.

Together we grappled her head around, so her nose was next to her side. I held her head tight until the farmer got a good grip. Eventually, she huffed and let her head settle on the cool grass. Once things calmed, I slid from her shoulders to get my calving equipment. Surrounding us, a semicircle of curious, liquid-eyed cattle held their heads low, sniffing in our direction. More cows standing behind them craned their necks, bearing witness to the scene.

Now that the farmer had the distressed cow in hand, I could return to the truck to get the equipment I needed. Rummaging around, I found my ropes and swung them around my arm. I then grabbed a 2-metre-long narrow steel device called a calving jack, which uses a ratchet system

to apply traction to a calf when it is stuck. Next, my vet's box of tricks. It was only then, reaching back in the rapidly vanishing light, that I realised I'd forgotten the last piece of essential equipment: a headlamp. Calving a cow is tricky enough without doing it in the dark.

'I'll need you to hold her still while I pull the truck up so we have some light,' I told the farmer.

By now, the farmer was perched comfortably on his steed. He looked at the rising full moon on the horizon.

'Yull have light frum the moon!' he crowed.

I pondered this for a moment, then agreed. The idea of calving by moonlight was intriguing after all.

I made my way back over and put my gear down. The cow had relaxed a little, and was now obligingly lying on her side. From his warm cow seat the farmer was gazing out at the final flare of golden light vanishing behind the mountains; he'd relaxed, too, it seemed.

I gave the cow an epidural, carefully inserting a long needle between the vertebrae at the base of her tail. Next, I cleaned her back end, then washed my hands and forearms. I rubbed thick orange lube on my arms, and then checked her inside. I was met with a familiar warmth, and my cold fingers thawed a little. The calf was wedged with its nose just protruding from its mother's vulva. One of its front legs was coming hoof-forward, with the elbow stuck back beside its chest. The other leg was still tucked all the way back and well out of reach.

I put my fingers in the calf's mouth and it moved its tongue, confirmation that it was still alive. A correctly

presenting calf comes out like Superman, taking its first heroic dive into the world — a serious drop for a newborn calf from a standing cow's backside. If they are one of the luckier ones, the cow will give birth lying on her side. It always baffled me how the little calves managed to avoid injury, plonking down onto the grass from such a height.

But this calf wasn't going anywhere in its current position. I ran a clear rubber tube into the mother's birth canal and positioned it over the calf, then pumped lube around it.

I started Plan A. Placing my hand on the calf's forehead, I tried to push it back into the cow. The calf didn't budge. I changed tactics and tried sliding my hand past the calf's neck, hoping I could get its malpresenting leg up, but the leg was on the side of the cow that lay on the ground. All her weight was crushing my hand, and I grunted in pain as I tried to push through. The farmer turned to watch me and raised an eyebrow. I was thwarted. Damn. I settled with extending the calf's leg that was already pointed forward all the way out, so that it stuck out of the cow's back end alongside its head.

Time for Plan B. We needed to roll the cow onto her other side so that I had more space to free the leg. We sat her up on her haunches, and of course she tried to stand and throw us once more.

'Watchit! She'll go ya!' the farmer cried for a second time.

We wrestled with her swinging neck and concrete-hard head. Finally, we pulled her head around again, this time

the other way. Together, we planted our shoulders, one just above the armpit and the other on her hips, and drove with our legs, heaving her over onto her other side. It's no wonder New Zealand has so much success in rugby: half the nation spends its time tackling and scrummaging livestock.

Around us silver moonlight reflected off the watchful eyes of the other curious cattle. The paddock and surrounding trees had transformed into a magical grey-scape under the glow of the moon.

After washing my hands again, I reached back in. To my disappointment, I still couldn't get past the calf's shoulder to reach the misplaced leg. The cow's birth canal was too narrow. Time for Plan C: gentle traction.

I wouldn't normally pull a calf out with one leg back, but it was my last option and worth a try. I pumped even more lube over the calf and looped my rope around the front leg, just above the calf's carpal joint, which is the equivalent of a human's wrist. I then made a second loop just below its carpus to reduce the pressure from the pull. Next, with a separate rope, I made a bigger loop that I slipped over the calf's head, making sure it went all the way behind its ears and pulled tight in its mouth. Then I picked up my calving jack.

The calving jack is used by first bracing it against the cow's back end. A long metal bar extends about 2 metres back from the brace. On the metal bar is a ratchet system

from which you can attach ropes. Now, I know what you might be thinking. This barbaric chap is about to pull the head off the poor wee thing! I petition for a delay in your assessment. Would I accost you with such a tale so early in the piece?

Newborn calves are very different to newborn babies. Their bones, including their skulls and jaws, are developed and strong. They are designed to be on their feet and running within the hour — the alternative is to be lion's tucker. Well, at least it was where they originally came from; there isn't as much as a toothed goose to pose a threat to anything larger than a well-fed guinea pig here in Kiwiland. Although a great deal of care is still required, due to this handy design you can put more traction on a calf than you might think.

I placed the calving jack brace against the cow's back end, then wrapped the ropes around the hooks on the ratchet. Slowly, I increased the tension on the ropes by working the ratchet.

The farmer peered over the cow's back as I worked. I gradually added tension and angled the device so that it was pulling the calf in a downward direction as well as out. With each pull, the calf inched from the cow. An eye appeared, then an ear, then a shoulder . . . until, all at once, the little female calf came rushing out, slithering from her mother, shiny and slippery in her foetal membranes. She made a wet splat as she landed on the grass. I removed the ropes and cleared her nose.

All my attention was now on the calf as I pulled mucous

from her nose and mouth, then vigorously rubbed her over the ribs. I heaved her up off the ground to let the last of the birth fluids drain from her nose and mouth. My back strained as I lifted her by the waist, gently swinging her from side to side, allowing gravity to do the work. Slimy mucous glinted in the moonlight as it ran from her nose and pooled on the grass. Still, she lay limp in my arms. Despite my efforts, she wouldn't breathe. Had I pulled too hard? Had I taken too long?

I rubbed the calf's slimy back firmly with one arm, then slapped the side of her chest to stimulate her. I put my fingers in her nose and pinched between her nostrils.

Wake up! My muscles screamed as I held the heavy, limp calf in the air.

Then, a cough. She took her first breath. Slow, wet and ragged as it was, there was life. Relief rolled over me as I laid her on the grass in a dog's sitting position so she could breathe more easily. Once she was breathing well, I turned my attention back to the cow. I put my hand in to check for a twin or for any damage to the uterus. She felt fine, and the farmer, still roosted on her side, chirped his satisfaction.

I injected her with oxytocin to help close the uterus, along with antibiotics, pain relief and a calcium-glucose mix. I had one final wrestle with her to get some more glucose, an added measure against ketosis, into her mouth. Before I'd finished, she was clambering to her feet. The dismounted farmer made a dash for it, anticipating a vengeful charge that never came.

Our ever-faithful bovine observers let out a silent cheer

for me and my new friends. Exhausted but triumphant, I made my way back to the truck.

As I filled out the paperwork, my new comrade told me a story that explained his somewhat surprising degree of nervousness, given his obvious years of farming experience. A few years back he had been bowled down and savagely gored by a bull that had mashed him into the ground and smashed his ribs. Sharp hooves had stomped him again and again, pummelling him into the dirt, breaking skin and cracking bones. The bull was rearing up and thumping down with his full weight, crushing the poor man's crumpled body.

Just as he had given up hope of surviving the onslaught, his son came hurtling into the paddock, running at the beast with a stick in his hand. He'd saved his father's life. The farmer had been nervy around cattle ever since. I viewed his earlier leap onto the cow's head with a new sense of awe as he finished his tale.

It was with some satisfaction that I noticed the cow sniffing and then licking her calf. I said my goodbyes to the gentleman and the four-legged onlookers and loaded the last of my things back into the truck. The hot steam from my shower earlier that evening had been replaced with sweat, mud and foetal fluids, but I drove home smiling, the image of the stocky man flying through the air fresh in my mind. What an absolute legend.

CHAPTER TWO

VET SCHOOL

Ten years earlier . . .

THE CAR SLOWED TO A STOP. The headlights lit the outside of a run-down flat. I could hear shouting and music coming from the backyard. Beside me in the back seat, Pepper casually adjusted the collar on her overalls.

Olive turned around from the driver's seat. 'Are you sure you want to do this?' she asked, raising her eyebrows. 'It would be better to wait until the first wave of the other first-years goes in: the first ones in always get it the worst . . .'

Becca chuckled beside her in the front. 'I'm going to wait with Olive. The cannon fodder can go first.' She shooed us from the car like pesky chooks.

Pepper and I clambered out into the cool winter's night. At the side of the house, a huge ram's skull was being lowered from a tree by a rope. Pepper and I were both dressed in dark-green overalls, having been warned by the older students to be prepared for the worst.

The four of us had completed our entry papers in

Auckland, studying together almost every day. The stress of competing with hundreds of other students for a few coveted spots in the school had bonded us like troopers. About 40 of us were applying from Auckland. The lecturers had said that usually only two or three students get through from the Auckland group. This year, it was we four. It certainly helped that Olive already had an engineering degree, and Pepper and Becca had both been part-way through med school when they'd decided to make the jump to veterinary medicine. I was the limpet that had latched on and made friends with the right people.

That night, it was possible we were the only ones from our class brave enough or stupid enough to turn up. We were first-years. And we were to be initiated into vet school.

'I'll go first,' I announced as we approached the open front door. 'Stay close!'

Pepper shoved me aside. 'We both know you're a lightweight Christian schoolboy who is going to tip over at the first whiff of something stronger than a ginger beer. I'll go first.'

'Damn, Pepper.' I feigned indignation. 'And I thought the terrorising happened inside.'

She strode ahead, flung the door open and was gone. Without anyone to masquerade for, my confidence fell away. I approached the open door and edged inside. Clammy hands grabbed me and pulled me to one side. I felt cold

steel as a drench gun nozzle was shoved between my teeth. The device, reserved for sheep, had a new and noble role that night. First-years. A laughing girl squeezed the trigger and a jet of burning liquid hit the back of my throat. I swallowed like an obliging lamb, then looked for Pepper. She had vanished.

'Baaaaaah!' the lass cried into my ear. 'Yeah! That's the one.' She laughed again, her curly ginger hair bobbing. 'Wait here,' she ordered, then headed through a door, shutting it behind her.

Chanting came from the next room, and, before I had time to recover, the girl returned and shoved me through the door. I hit a wall of musky heat — the kind of wet warmth that can only be generated by hundreds of bodies crammed together in a small space. I caught a glimpse of Pepper disappearing out another door. Was that blood on her face? Was she hurt? She gave me a wink and waved as she sauntered off.

People were crowding in, red-faced and chattering. I was pushed into the centre of the room and a circle formed around me. The group hushed as a tall, sharp-featured man stepped forward to speak; the rabble had a leader.

'From the skull he shall drink!' he announced.

A deep chant of 'Ohu!' boomed from the students. Then silence.

'The knowledge of the ram shall flow to you!' the leader continued.

'Ohu!' the crowd bellowed, their feet falling into a unified stomp.

‘It is better to behold than to tame!’ he pronounced to the ceiling.

‘Ohu!’

‘To heal than to hurt!’

‘Ohu!’

The man paused and looked at me. ‘Will you honour our codes and, before all else, do no harm?’

The room watched me, silent, questioning.

‘I will,’ I answered, my voice thin in the charged space.

‘Ohu-ohu-ohu!’ they chanted.

‘Bring forth the ram,’ he commanded.

Two younger men came forward, holding an enormous ram skull on their shoulders. They stopped in front of me, the skull at eye level. They slowly turned it around to reveal a hole at the back. Someone handed the speaker an open can of beer, and he began to pour its contents into the skull. The crowd began to stir.

I wondered vaguely if they ever cleaned the skull.

The men put the skull to my lips.

‘Ohu! Ohu! Ohu!’

The chanting resumed, softly at first, then rising to a crescendo as I gulped the cheap ale.

I managed to drink half the beer; the rest poured down the front of my overalls. The cheers grew to a roar.

A merry girl rushed forward and rubbed her fingers across my cheeks, leaving streaks of red. I was relieved to smell paint. Then I was swept into the air, carried on heads and arms from the house and into the backyard. The stuffy heat and manic chattering of the room was replaced with

cool night air and the sound of music thumping from a large speaker perched on an outdoor table.

Finally, recognition! This was more like it!

But as the mob approached a muddy patch in the backyard, my euphoria evaporated.

'Where are you taking me?' I shouted helplessly, my voice drowned in the noise.

Then I was soaring through the air and splashing down into cold mud. Bodies started to splash around me, an odd medley of grunts and laughter. Soon other first-years were raining down like discarded spuds. Last of all was Pepper, who landed on me, sinking me deeper into the mud. She bounced back up, clean as a Persian cat, and hopped away giggling.

As the night progressed, I witnessed a series of boat races that had nothing to do with boats, mud-caked students resembling Uruk-hai, and a grown man peeing himself on purpose.

A fierce wrestling contest began between the horribly outnumbered first-years and the older students. Amidst the chaos, I noticed a boy I hadn't seen before. He was short and squat and was struggling in the mud against a much larger student. His wide-set, dark eyes had the tell-tale squint of someone used to wearing glasses. As he clenched his jaw and bared his teeth, I noticed a distinctive gap between his two front teeth.

The big man tossed the smaller chap to the ground, sitting on him triumphantly while his classmates cheered. It didn't look as though the hulk was going to give up

his human stool anytime soon, so I took a run-up and launched myself at him as he revelled in his victory. I hit him shoulder-first, tackling him off the boy. We slid together along the muddy ground, me on top. I climbed off and went back over to pull the boy up, watching out of the corner of my eye for a counter-attack.

'Thanks!' he beamed, getting to his feet. 'I'm Don.' His teeth and eyes glowed white as he squinted at me from behind his muddy mask. We clasped hands.

'Marcus,' I told him. 'I think we are in for one hell of a ride, Don.'

Seconds later I was bulldozed off my feet and back into the mud by one of the girls. Don watched us for a moment and guessed that I didn't need to be rescued.

'Okay,' he called down to me, 'nice to meet you. I'll save you a seat in class.'

I managed to give him a thumbs-up before being rolled back down into the sludge. Maybe I needed rescuing after all.

Outside the anatomy lab, everyone looked different under the hallway's fluorescent lights. Mud and overalls had been replaced by clean faces and brand-new white lab coats. The only person I didn't have trouble recognising, with his mousy brown hair and pale skin, was Don. His eyes had relaxed now that his glasses were once more sitting comfortably on his nose, and he looked considerably more at home than he had in the wrestling pit. He moved over

and glanced at the half-eaten sandwich in my hand.

'Is that . . .' — his eyes widened — '. . . MacKenzie bread?'

'Uh, yeah,' I confessed.

'Dude, those loaves are like four bucks fifty! Why are you eating your lunch anyway? It's nine a.m.'

'I heard the lab is three hours long,' I explained. 'I don't want to have a rumbling stomach while we cut up dogs . . .'

Don nodded solemnly and pulled out a Marmite sandwich, the black tar-like goop oozing from plain white slices of bread. 'This loaf was ninety-nine cents,' he told me glumly, still eyeing my sandwich.

I pulled it closer to my chest. Mercifully, just then the door opened and a tall, smiling man in his sixties gestured for us to come in. Don and I stuffed the rest of our sandwiches into our mouths and filed into the large room with the other students.

Soft gasps came from some of them as they took in their surroundings. There were 25 small steel tables spread throughout the room. On each one was a stiff, dead dog. Some were large, some small; there were Jack Russells, Rottweilers, terriers, collies and many other breeds. They stared blank-eyed as I walked slowly through the room.

'Choose one!' the lecturer called from the front. 'Get into groups of four. Choose wisely: this will be your cadaver for the next year and a half.'

I walked up to a chocolate Labrador with grey hair around his muzzle. Who had his family been? They must have been kind to have donated him to the vet school,

trusting we would be respectful with him. Earlier, one of the older students had told me not to choose a Labrador, warning me that I'd spend most of my time trying to dissect through fat, so I moved on.

Next, I stopped in front of a white greyhound. He was lean, muscled and took up the entire tabletop. My Auckland classmates came over to join me, nodding their approval. Pepper looked down at the dog sadly.

'Poor guy,' she said, patting him with a gloved hand. 'I wonder if he just ran too slow.'

'Maybe he was adopted after his racing days and lived a full and happy life?' I suggested.

Our muted conversation came to an abrupt end as a girl fled the lab, tears streaking her cheeks. By now the room was mostly silent, except for a few low, muttered comments.

'Open your dissection kits!' the lecturer instructed.

I could see Don unzipping his kit as he stood next to the Labrador. I'd been so distracted by the sandwich antics that I'd forgotten to pass on the tip. He spotted me and gave me a happy nod, his glasses now sitting behind a large pair of safety goggles.

'Feel for the spine of the scapula,' the lecturer said. 'It runs down the shoulder towards the joint. That's where you need to make the first incision.' His head bobbed as the students obeyed.

I ran my finger down the bony ridge of the greyhound's scapula, or 'shoulder blade,' as you would more commonly say for a human. The dog was cold to the touch. The cadavers

had been in the chiller before being laid out on the tables for us. I looked up at Olive.

'Did you really do this on human bodies at med school?' I asked her.

She nodded. 'You get used to it. We called our guy Fred.'

'Fred,' I echoed. 'What should we name our boy?'

We paused, then, when nothing was forthcoming, I picked up my scalpel.

'Do you mind if I do the first incision?' I asked. They nodded. I made a long cut behind the shoulder, then peeled a large flap of skin forward towards the dog's head to reveal the bright-red muscles of the shoulder. They were shiny from the formalin that had been injected into the cadavers to preserve them.

Pepper pointed to the muscle in front of the bony ridge on the scapula. 'I think that's the supraspinatus.'

I glanced up as another pale-faced student sped out of the room, one hand cupped to his mouth.

'I think that guy is about to throw up,' I said. The door swung shut behind him. As soon as I spoke, I realised that I was feeling a little light-headed, too. The room smelled of chemicals and flesh.

Pepper cut away the tendon on the muscle and lifted it, and as she did so a pale piece of connective tissue flicked up and hit my goggles, sticking there.

'Ahh!' I shouted. 'Gross!'

'Hello.'

I jumped at the man's voice. A large head had appeared over my shoulder.

‘You’re going to get much worse things flicked at your face on the job, I assure you.’

It was the lecturer. He circled around to face me, smiling. His head, sporting frizzy white hair, jutted forward.

‘So,’ he went on, ‘what did you decide to name him?’

How had he heard us? He had been on the other side of the room.

‘Mr Hoons,’ I declared.

He looked at the greyhound, and then up at the rest of my group. ‘Mr . . . Hoons?’ He raised a bushy eyebrow.

‘We’re still working on a name,’ Olive said.

Mr Hoons and our mad professor taught us as much as they could about canine anatomy over the next 18 months. As did Dobby the sheep, Ernest the chicken, Hodor the horse, and finally Francisco the fish.

Those years we spent diligently scurrying between labs and lectures in histology, pathology, pharmacology, physiology, virology, microbiology, radiology, dentistry, animal handling, genetics, medicine and surgery wouldn’t be enough. They couldn’t be enough. Nothing could quite prepare us for our next trial.

It was time to go out into the field.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ISLAND

THE THICK, HUMID AIR HIT US as soon as we stepped from the plane. In the distance, beyond the airfield, rich green jungle cloaked spiking mountains. Smiling locals playing Island music greeted us inside the terminal. The hulking man leading the musical trio dwarfed his ukulele.

'We are geniuses!' I declared to Don as we hauled our heavy suitcases up from the carousel. 'Doing our clinical placement on a tropical island is the best idea we've ever had.'

I thought of the other students, probably cramped in some dingy clinic experiencing an advanced state of vitamin D deficiency. My bag was heavy, filled with donated drugs from some generous vet clinics in New Zealand. A good number of them were prescription-only substances.

'Hey, uh, Don? How does this work, with all the drugs?' I asked, wondering why I hadn't thought to ask earlier.

Don shrugged. His bag was just as loaded. We put our bags up on the customs desk. A large, muscular man eyed us up.

'Kia orana. Anything to declare?' he asked.

‘Yes. I have a bag full of drugs,’ I told him.

He looked back at me coolly. I felt a sharp kick strike my shin. It was Don.

‘We are here as volunteers at the vet clinic!’ Don added hurriedly.

‘Open the bags,’ the man ordered.

We unzipped our suitcases to reveal an assortment of drug boxes, bottles and jars of various shapes and sizes. A shiny metal canister of isoflurane, an anaesthetic gas, sat glinting at the top of Don’s pile. There was barely room for our clothes. The man glanced over the bags’ contents. We held our breath.

‘’Kay.’ He dismissed us with an absent wave of his hand.

We hauled our suitcases off the tables and dragged them towards the airport exit.

‘Whoa. I hope they have a farm vet on this island, cos the mules just arrived, eh, Donny?’ I laughed.

‘Shut up,’ Don growled. ‘We’re not even out of the airport yet, you blundering gumbie.’

‘I’m pretty sure this island is so small they knew who we were as soon as we landed. I heard the prison here doesn’t even have walls. The villagers just tell the guards if one of the prisoners is off wandering around and they come out and send them back. Plus, they do craft in there, whittling and stuff like that. Doesn’t sound too bad.’

‘I bet you five mangoes,’ Don challenged, ‘that’s a yarn.’

I shook Don’s hand confidently.

On a lawn scattered with coconuts in front of a simple, single-storey clinic waited the team we'd be assisting: the head vet, Lyn, a new graduate vet called Kari, and a handful of volunteers. One of them stood out from the rest. She was tall with olive skin, and smiled at me warmly before giving me a tight embrace. Mary-Anne was from California, and was putting in some volunteer hours before starting vet school there. I tried not to blush. Don shook his head at me, stifling a smile at my awkwardness.

'Welcome to our paradise!' Lyn announced abruptly. 'My first exam question for you is . . .' She paused dramatically. 'What is Long Island iced tea?'

Don and I looked at each other dumbly, then back at Lyn.

'Um, a drink?' Don tried.

'Not just a drink!' she declared. 'It's the best damn cocktail in the universe. And they make a blimmin' good one on this island. We're going to get one immediately! Mary-Anne, close the clinic at once.'

A week after those first introductions, I opened my eyes to see a large shar pei sitting beside my bed, his nose inches away from mine. A long globule of saliva hung glistening from his jowls, and his hot, fishy breath blasted my senses. Mary-Anne's face popped out from behind him, smiling.

'Good morning! It's ten a.m. How are you even still asleep?' she chastised. 'The cleaner was vacuuming right next to you, and there's like ten dogs in there.' She gestured

towards the kennels, where a band of dogs barked a deafening medley.

A snippet from the night before flashed through my mind. I was leaning out the back of an open-sided bus with a thatched roof, trying to high-five someone on a motorbike. The lead vet had a strict 'no Long Island iced tea, no surgery for you the next day' policy. For the third time that week, I had obliged. The only issue was I didn't share her veteran British liver.

I felt a small surge of panic. 'Wait — am I meant to be in surgery?' I asked, my eyes widening, head throbbing.

Mary-Anne grinned at me. 'Nah, it's your day off! I just thought you might be dying. I gotta go back.' She trotted off, the shar pei in tow.

I dawdled to the kitchen in search of water. I was halfway through a bottle when Don burst in. 'Where's Lyn?' he demanded, glancing around the house.

'I dunno,' I gurgled. 'What's up?'

'Kari's in surgery and she can't find the cat's uterus.'

'I can help,' I said.

Don raised his eyebrows. We were in our third year of university and had barely done a single surgery.

'What are you going to do, dive in there with your snorkel?'

I headed towards the surgery room. As I opened the heavy door and stepped into the cool air of the only air-conditioned room in the clinic Kari looked up; she had a finger in the cat's abdomen, searching for the uterus, which was to be removed. She was flustered and clearly

disappointed that I wasn't Lyn, the head vet. I stepped up to the table and lifted a corner of the surgery drape.

'I checked that,' a nurse snapped, irritated.

I parted the fur just below the cat's bottom, and two small fluffy balls looked back at me.

'It's a boy,' I said, dropping the drape and leaving the surgery room. I didn't know how to do surgery yet, but I had spent a few days with Mary-Anne, sexing the kittens. She would hold them up and quiz me. I was hilariously bad at the seemingly simple task at first, but soon got a grip on it. It was mostly an excuse just to hang around with her, but today my feline studies had paid off.

The day before, though, things had not gone so well. A man had brought a wild cat to the clinic, and as I was the only one there at the time, I'd decided I could take care of things. We were running a desexing programme to reduce the populations of wild cats and dogs on the island, and the man had spent a lot of time and effort catching the cat and bringing it into the clinic. He sat the cage down on the dirt in front of the outdoor kennels. I knelt and peered in. Two wild green eyes stared back at me. I rose and picked up a towel from the shelf.

'Are you sure you can do this?' the man asked, doubt clear in his eyes.

'Yeah, mate. No worries, I got this,' I assured him.

I mean, after all, how hard could it be to pin down a wild

cat and throw it into one of our cages? It's a tiny, 3-kilogram little critter after all . . . I tipped the cage on its back, so that the door was facing the sky, then I opened it, tentatively peering in. The hunched feline glared up at me, hissing and spitting from the bottom of the cage. I dropped the towel on it. The cat fell silent.

I went to reach in, then hesitated. 'More towels, please,' I said with the air of a surgeon asking for his scalpel.

The man passed me two more towels, and I dropped them onto the cat. I stared down at the pile of towels in the cage, an enraged wild cat somewhere in the mix. The man looked nervous.

Man, this guy needed to chill. I slowly put my hands down into the cage. A low droning began to reverberate from the centre of the towel ball as I wrapped my hands around it, gripping tightly. As I slowly extracted my prize, the ball of tooth and muscle went rigid in my grip, like a loaded spring ready to fire.

'Open that cage. Please!' This time I sounded less like a surgeon and more like a frightened boy. I gestured to a kennel cage. The towel bomb exploded in my hands. A black head burst from the top, teeth bared, ears flat. The cat screeched and hissed.

I held the towels as tightly as I could. The determined beast pushed down with its feet and freed half of its body. I couldn't pull the towel back over the cat without releasing what little grasp I had left. The man stared, his eyes wide, and took a step back. I looked at him wildly, pleading for him to do something.

He began fumbling with the cage latch. The cat twisted in my grip, sensing freedom was close. I had seconds to act. I ran towards the open clinic door, the writhing cat held out in front of me. With one last thrash, the cat flew from the towels and landed on the ground in a crouch. Then, in a flash, it was gone — a black streak vanishing into the thick jungle.

I stared into the bush for a moment. Please, come back? I looked from the empty towels in my hands, now covered in black fur, to the man. He didn't meet my eyes. There was nothing much to say.

'Uh, sorry . . . sir,' I tried.

Without a word, he picked up his cage and left.

Now, on my day off, I winced at the still-painful memory as I walked over to the puppy pen. Those little fuzz-balls always cheered me up as they tumbled and rolled about, chewing on each other fondly. I grabbed an armful of them, bundled them against my chest and made my way across the road to the beach.

'Swimming lesson time, kids!' I told them.

The white sand was warm beneath my feet as I passed under the palm trees and towards the clear turquoise water. I put the pups down into the shallows and watched them bound around happily. Then I scooped one back up and waded further out into the warm water, out to where she couldn't touch the bottom. She clung onto me tightly. I let

her go in the water and she swam to me. She scrambled up my chest, her claws scratching at me. 'Ow, lady!' I scolded. Red claw-marks now criss-crossed my chest.

'Hey, mister.' Mary-Anne stood on the beach in a sky-blue scrub top. I felt a tightness high in my chest. 'I need a hand to feed Luey. But you look like you have your hands full there, huh?' she added with a wry smile. 'I hope those claw-marks are from the puppy. I heard about your antics yesterday . . .'

Blast. What *had* I done last night?

'You know, there's another cat out there breeding in that jungle, thanks to you!' She laughed.

I chuckled, embarrassed.

'No, no, it's fine. I was just about finished here anyway . . .' I gathered up the puppies. 'Let's go.'

Mary-Anne led me back across the road. We returned the puppies to their little wrestling arena and made our way over to Luey the spaniel's hospital pen. He was lying on his side, his eyes flicking from side to side. He tried to lift his head when he heard us, but he couldn't, and it flopped back down onto the blanket.

'What's wrong with him?' I asked her.

'You tell me, you're the vet,' she replied, a glint in her eye.

'I have about fifty more exams to pass before I can say that,' I pointed out.

I opened the pen door and knelt down next to Luey to examine him. His body was floppy. Flaccid paralysis. His pupils continued to flick rapidly from side to side. Nystagmus. Maybe his vestibular system — which involves

the inner ear and helps with balance — was affected?

'Could it be botulism?' I ventured. I knew animals could ingest bacteria that produced the botulinum toxin, usually from rotting animals or bones. That could make them go all floppy, like this guy was.

'It's fish poisoning,' she told me.

'I've never heard of that. Which fish?'

'It's not about the fish — it's a toxic alga that grows in the fish. If animals ingest it, they get like this.' She pointed at Luey.

I looked at him again. 'Poor thing . . . Can he survive?'

'If we take good care of him. His body needs time to clear the toxin.'

With that, she joined me in the pen. She mixed some dog food with water to make a paste. I elevated Luey's body on some blankets so his head hung down, to stop fluid from running down into his lungs. As I cradled his head, Mary-Anne slowly syringed the food onto his tongue. He was still able to move it and swallow a little.

'Good boy,' she soothed. 'Part of our work is to educate people on the island.' She slowly syringed another mouthful into Luey. 'We need to tell them that feeding raw fish to the dogs can be fatal.'

'You should educate new arrivals here about Lyn's Long Island iced teas, too. The symptoms are strikingly similar.'

Mary-Anne let out a warm burst of laughter. 'Well, at least you know how this poor guy feels.'

The next day we returned to Luey's pen. This time we took him out and tried to walk him. His legs were still limp, and they couldn't bear any weight, so we wrapped a towel under his belly and lifted him, Mary-Anne standing on one side, and me on the other. We walked him a few steps along the grass this way, his legs wobbling. He was desperate to walk, but his feet weren't responding. After a few lengths of the small lawn, we gave him a rest.

Luey's progress was slow, but day by day he began to bear more weight as he walked. With the help of the rest of the team at the clinic, we repeated his feeding and exercise routines for five days until he finally took a few unsteady steps on his own. It was a few more days before he could eat and walk normally again.

Once Lyn was satisfied with his condition, a local couple arrived to pick him up. They were overjoyed to see Luey recovered. The woman handed Don a large box filled with mangoes and bananas. Still on a student budget, Don and I had been living off these tokens of gratitude for the past few weeks, along with canned fish. The clean food and sun had left us glowing with health. Don's hair was shinier, although I guessed his liver resembled a chewed boot.

'Chur-chur!' Lyn appeared, holding up a bottle of gin. Mary-Anne was standing beside her, an apologetic look on her face. 'This is a time for celebration!'

Don and I groaned in unison.

I was going to need the same gentle treatment as Luey if I stayed on this island much longer.

Mary-Anne and I walked on the beach beneath a startling canvas of stars.

Mary-Anne spoke first. 'We're not going to see each other again, are we?' The question hung in the air. I was going back home to finish my degree, and she would be starting her own studies in California. It had been only a month, but spending every day together had brought us close.

'I'll miss you, Mary-Anne,' I offered.

'Marcus!' Don shouted from the street. He paused when he saw us holding hands. 'The taxi is here . . .' he finished lamely. 'Sorry,' he added, and turned and walked back up to the road.

We followed Don to where the taxi waited. I wanted to kiss her, but would doing so mean I would just miss her even more? We were approaching the rest of the group, and my window was closing. I stopped and turned to face her.

'Maybe we'll cross paths some day?' The emptiness of the words resounded with a dull clang.

Mary-Anne smiled sadly and pulled me into a tight embrace. Don called out that we would miss the plane if we didn't get a move-on. Maybe I wanted to miss the plane. Maybe I could just stay here forever with Mary-Anne, eating mangoes and drinking Long Island iced tea.

I pictured the pile of textbooks waiting for me on my desk at home. As much as I wanted to stay and live off mangoes, I couldn't. As much as I longed to abandon those

books, they needed to be read. It was time to go. Back to university. Back to reality.