

“Sprawled across the ground lay what looked to Thomas like a dragon from an ancient fairy tale. Its long spiky tail curled around its huge scaly body and large leathery wings lay limply against its sides. Shimmering golden eyes gazed straight at him, haunted and full of pain.”

Apart from his good friend Huhana (who told him stories about taniwha) and his faithful dog Lucy, Thomas was determined to keep the dragon he named Puff a secret. He couldn't bear to think what Eddie's gang of bullies might do to her. Puff gives Thomas the strength to stand up to his adversaries. But can she help in the fight against a mega bully, whose development plans threaten the whole town's environment?

Puff has been injured and Thomas helps her heal. Or is it the other way around?

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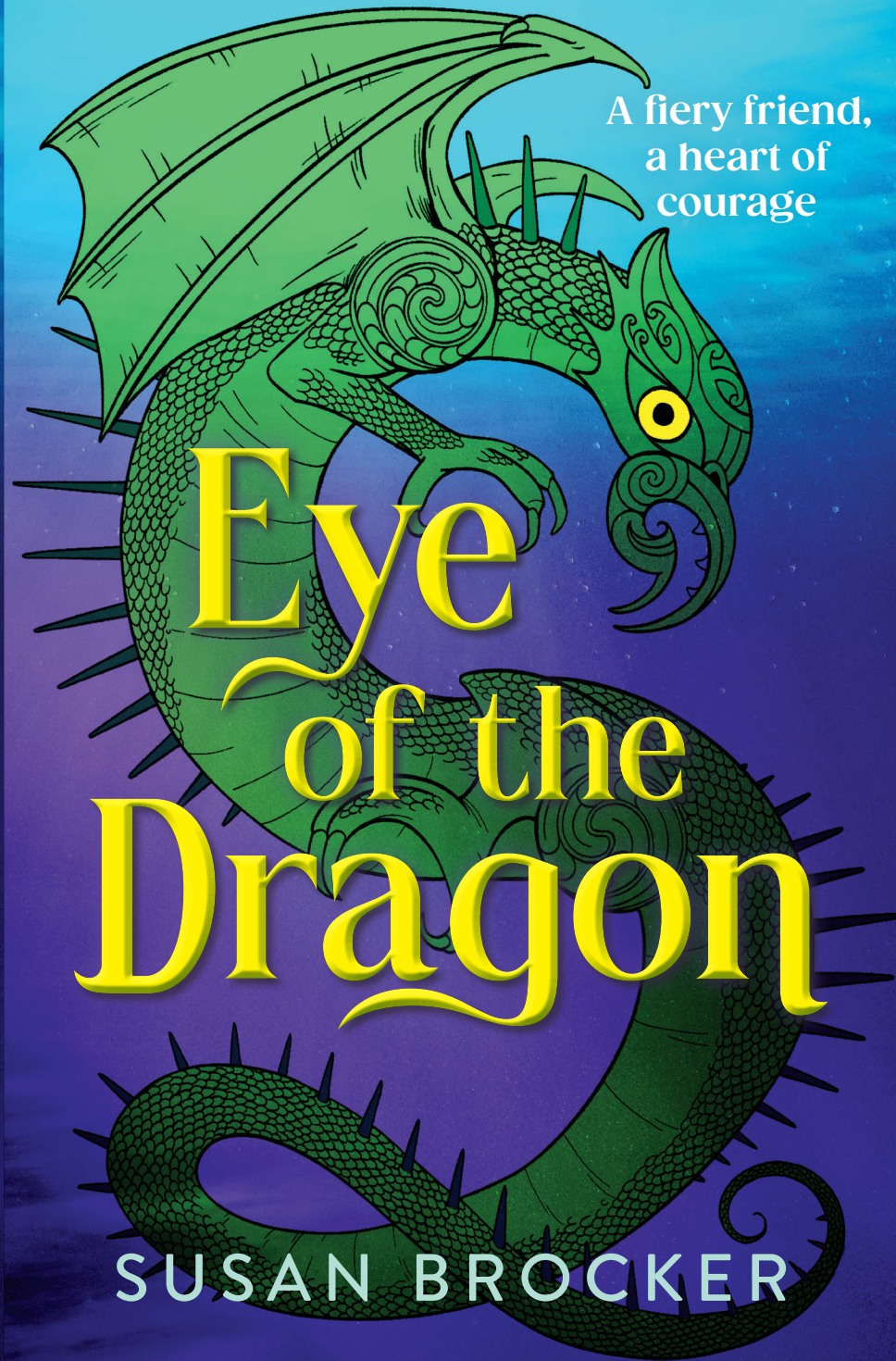
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Eye of the Dragon

SUSAN BROCKER



A fiery friend,  
a heart of  
courage



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## 1.

# Finding the Cave

**T**hey were arguing about him again. It was always about him. Thomas could hear them easily through the thin walls of the bach.

“Why can’t he stay with his father, on weekends at least?” his stepfather said. “We need time to ourselves.”

“Thomas is no problem, Tim,” his mother replied. “We hardly see him, always hidden away in his bedroom. Your Stacey’s the one always in our face with her teenage tantrums.”

“Look,” Tim said, quieter now so Thomas had to strain to hear, “you’ve said yourself that Leo should see more of his son. Wouldn’t it be good for them to spend some time together?”

“No!” his mother said. “I told Leo when we split up that he couldn’t have contact with Thomas. Not after what he did.”

“Come on, Julia, accidents happen. He still cares for the boy. He’s his only child, after all,” Tim replied.

“Leo doesn’t want him around. He’s embarrassed by him and then Thomas’s stutter only gets worse.”

There it was again. The same old problem Thomas faced every day of his life. His st-st-st-stutter.

He’d begun stuttering when he was about eleven years old, just after the accident. The specialists had said it might go away, but it never had. He was thirteen now and he still stuttered.

Thomas slunk from his bedroom and down the hall. “Come on, Lucy,” he whispered to the family dog, and they sneaked out the back door together.

Lucy knew they were running off to their favourite hide-hole and her tail twirled happily.

Thomas loved following the trail of tussock grasses leading down to the wild west coast beach. The wind whipped through his wispy fair hair and the hot black sand nibbled at his toes. Lucy raced on ahead, her golden tail a waving banner.

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He'd grown up in this small seaside town and knew every one of its bays, inlets, and shores. The dangerous bar lay right in front of them as he followed Lucy along the black sand beach. Over the years, many sailors and fishers had lost their lives trying to cross that powerful current. It was a school rule that every child must learn to swim as soon as possible. But Thomas never had. Water terrified him. He liked the sound and look of the ocean; he just didn't like the feel of its surging waters, as if it wanted to drag him down forever.

One day, it nearly had.

Thomas watched Lucy dashing in and out of the surf, barking at the waves, chasing imaginary sticks. He remembered when his mum had first brought her home. He'd felt so embarrassed. Here was this ultra-cute, fluffy, gold and white puppy that would never even reach up to his knees and he had to take her for walks! The guys at school already mocked him enough about his stutter, without him having to take a poncy little dog for walks . . . What?!

But now, Thomas no longer cared what they thought. Lucy was a cool dog. He enjoyed watching

her play without a care in the world; she made him smile.

Suddenly, she rushed away from the waves and dashed up the beach. When she reached a large outcrop of rocks at the base of the cliff, she began barking wildly.

Thomas hurried over, worried she might have bailed up a seal. Instead, she stood outside the opening to a deep, dark cave. Towering rocks bordered both sides of the opening which was the width of a small car. All looked black and bleak inside.

Lucy stood at the cave entrance, still barking furiously, her hackles raised. Thomas had never seen her so worked up.

“Lucy, it’s okay. Come away.”

But Lucy kept on staring into the cave and barking.

Thomas walked up to the cave entrance. He was about to peer in when a burst of flame suddenly shot out. The heat was searing. Both Thomas and Lucy fell to the ground. Lucy cried out with pain. Thomas dashed over and saw that the fur along her back was singed. “Come on, Lucy, we’ve gotta get out of here.”

But Lucy only whimpered and struggled to her

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feet, then returned to the cave entrance.

“No!” Thomas cried. “Something’s hurt you. We can’t go in.”

Lucy inched into the cave, sniffing the air. Thomas had no choice but to follow. He couldn’t abandon her.

They walked warily into the cave together. At first it was pitch black, then flashes of bright light lit up the area ahead. They could hear heavy breathing and groaning, and the air smelt charred and bloody. They followed the flashes of light until they entered a large grotto.

Sprawled across the ground, covering more than six metres, lay what looked to Thomas like a dragon from an ancient fairy tale. Its long spiky tail curled around its huge scaly body and large leathery wings lay limply against its sides. Along its back, a row of spines stood a metre high. But to Thomas, the most amazing sight was the creature’s shimmering golden eyes. They gazed straight at him, haunted and full of pain, as if begging him for help.

Unafraid, Lucy ran up to the beast and stopped at a spot on its scaly body, sniffing frantically. Thomas walked gingerly over to investigate and saw a deep

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puncture hole in the creature's side. The wound was bloody and swollen. When Thomas tried to touch it, the beast turned its birdlike head to him and bared its sharp fangs. But it didn't snap. Thomas realised in that instant the creature understood he wouldn't hurt it.

“I think it's smashed into a tree or branch, Lucy. We need to get that huge splinter out or it might die.”





## 2.

# The Swimming Lesson

**T**homas and Lucy dashed home along the beach, puffing by the time they reached the beach. Tim was in the kitchen cooking dinner. Lucy collapsed on her bed beside the back door, wrapping her tail around her like a furry snake.

“C-c-c-can I ask you something?” Thomas said, feeling odd even as he spoke. After all, he hardly ever talked to Tim. Thomas only seemed to stutter when he spoke to people, never animals.

“Sure thing!” Tim said, stirring noodles in a big pot on the stove.

“W-w-we have got these qu-qu-questions to answer for science,” Thomas said, bobbing his head.

“We need to explain what p-p-p-paramedics would do if they had to t-t-treat someone with a deep ssssplinter wound.”

“Ah,” Tim said, stirring the noodles. “That’s a tricky question.”

Tim was a doctor, that’s why Thomas had asked. But Thomas also knew nobody would ever believe he’d found a dragon in a cave with a wound. That was crazy. He had to make up some sort of story even though he didn’t like lying to Tim, who’d always been kind to him.

“If they can see the splinter clearly, remove it with sterile forceps. Then clean the injury site with diluted iodine to prevent infection and cover the area with a sterile bandage to stop bleeding. But if it looks like the wound has festered, they must get the patient to a hospital immediately. They may need further surgery and a course of antibiotics.”

Great, Thomas thought, imagining rolling up to A & E with a dragon, even if he had a way of getting it there.

“C-c-c-can I borrow some of the stuff? You know, b-b-bandages and iodine, to show to my science class?” Thomas asked hopefully.

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“Yeah, sure. I’ll get some things together for you tomorrow at the surgery before school. But hey, what about your swimming lesson? Your mum will have my hide if you don’t turn up tonight.”

Thomas’s heart sank. He’d forgotten all about his blasted swimming lesson. Five pm on Tuesdays at the local pool. It was the worst time of Thomas’s life.

“Dinner will be ready when you get back. I know how much you love your swimming lesson.” Tim turned from the stove and grinned at Tim sympathetically, raising his eyebrows. “Yeah, right.”

“Yeah, rrrright,” Thomas said, and sighed.



Thomas grabbed his swimming togs from his drawer and a towel from the linen cupboard and shoved them into his backpack. He called “Bye” to Lucy and sprinted down the dusty track leading to the community pool.

The swimming instructor, Mr Donald Fisher, was waiting. As always. He stood with his feet wide apart, muscly arms crossed, his shaved head bronzed in the

afternoon sun. He checked his Gucci watch and eyed Thomas up and down. "Just on time."

Thomas didn't bother pointing out he was the first kid there.

Eddie soon strutted up with his mates, George and Noah. They ignored Thomas, and shoved past him into the changing rooms. Thomas followed, feeling sick inside as he always did on these horrible afternoons.

"You found your togs this time?" Eddie guffawed. "Not hidden in your sister's panty drawer like last time?"

Thomas knew to ignore him or else Eddie would only get more smart-arsed. He yanked off his tee shirt, shorts and undies and tugged on his togs. Eddie was only a scrawny guy, but he ran his gang of cronies with an iron fist. Thomas knew not to challenge him.

"Better be careful, don't want to get your tiny tackle tangled." Eddie laughed at his own joke. George and Noah smirked.

"Come on, boys, we don't have all night!" Mr Fisher yelled from the poolside.

"Yeah, coming Fishy," Eddie said, though not so loud that Mr Fisher could hear.

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Ten kids finally gathered at the poolside: six boys, mostly all Eddie's cronies, and four girls. Thomas knew them all, though he could call only one a friend. Her name was Huhana and she was in his class at school. She was teaching him some reo Māori and it was fun. Thomas didn't stutter with the Māori words he'd learnt, and he didn't stutter quite as much when he spoke with Huhana either.

"Okay, Thomas, you start the ball rolling tonight – or should I say floating."

Mr Fisher picked up a large inflatable blue ball and launched it into the very middle of the swimming pool. "I want you to leap in and roll it back. As you can see, it has handles that you can hold on to if you g-g-g-get ssssscared." He winked at the others.

Thomas winced. "I-I-I d-don't know if I can swim that far."

"Well, there's only one way to find out. Jump in and see. We're all here to save you if you get into trouble." Mr Fisher grinned.

Thomas crouched at the poolside and swung his legs into the water.

"Dive in, wimp!" Eddie yelled.

Thomas slipped into the water, still gripping the side of the pool. The night of the accident flooded into his head. He felt like he'd throw up.

"And they say the apple never falls far from the tree!" Mr Fisher laughed. "In your case, it rolled metres away. Hard to believe your father was one of New Zealand's best swimmers, even selected for the Commonwealth Games."

It was the same old story Thomas heard so many times, especially from Mr Fisher. His father and Mr Fisher had once been the best of mates and both were talented swimmers. They'd fought it out through rounds of competitions, but it was Thomas's dad who'd finally been selected for the Commonwealth Games. He turned down the selection when he found out his girlfriend Julie was pregnant. Thomas was due any day. His dad had said no to going to the Games because he wanted to be there when Thomas was born.

What a huge disappointment I must've been, Thomas thought as he clung to the pool side. His father had given all of that up for an idiot of a son who couldn't even swim, let alone speak properly.

"You can do it, Thomas," Huhana called from the

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poolside. “Just remember . . . *Kia m̄arie.*” *Be calm.* Good advice, Thomas thought.

He took a deep breath and used his feet to push himself away from the side of the pool. He swam as well as he could – dog paddling really, as his father had taught him as a toddler – to the big floating ball. He grabbed the handles and yanked the ball back to the poolside.

“You c-c-can have your sstupid ball.” He yelled up at Mr Fisher.

“That’s the way lad, just sssspit it out!”