

CHAPTER ONE

The dog is drowning. His eyes are wide, bloodshot; his ears flattened against his head. I fling myself into the mud at the edge of the water and reach for him. *I won't let you die here.*

He tries to haul himself out, but his cream coat is saturated and the weight drags him back down. Labradors are supposed to be strong swimmers, but he looks like an old dog and is only just managing to keep afloat. His head sinks beneath the water. I count one breath. He doesn't emerge. Two. *Come on!* Three. He re-surfaces, water cascading off his face as he coughs and struggles to breathe.

Our eyes lock. The dog makes a weak, snuffling sound. Nothing like the loud barks that echoed through the woods a few minutes ago. He sounded so afraid, I left the footpath straight away, barging through brambles and bushes to find him.

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I stretch out an arm, beckoning. The dog tries again. His paws dig deeper into the bank this time, his back legs kicking. I lean forward, cold sludge oozing beneath me, its fetid stench hitting the back of my throat. I can almost reach his nose, but there's nothing to grab hold of. A few more inches and I could latch on to his collar. But any further and I'll fall in myself. His whiskers tickle my skin and his hot breaths steam into my palm. I'm so close! My muscles are aching, screaming, shaking.

Just a bit further. You can do it!

But his claws rake through the mud and he sinks back with a whimper that makes my stomach clench. *No. Don't give up. Please!*

I rest back on my knees and cast a quick glance behind me. A blockade of trees conceals us from the main path. I listen, hoping I'll hear footsteps, but there's nothing. Just the murmur of wind rippling through leaves and the dog's clumsy paws smacking the water. Should I go and look for someone? I don't know what to do!

Then I hear a man's voice. Deep. Laced with worry. 'Jasper!' it calls. 'Jasper!'

The dog's head snaps up. He opens his mouth to bark, but swallows a mouthful of water instead.

The man sounds far away. I could try to find him, but I can't abandon Jasper.

Over here, I think. We're over here.

Thoughts are no good. I need words. They gather inside and claw up my throat like prisoners fighting to escape.

'Jasper! Jasper!' The man is afraid.

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My words tumble over each other in their rush to break free.
The man's fear turns to anger. 'Jasper, come here *now!*'

I can do this!

A voice rips through my mind like a sharp, stabbing headache. I try not to listen, but it's so loud, so brutal, it just cuts through everything else.

No, you can't, Megan. You really can't.

And just like that, my words are gone.

A sound of raw frustration scrapes across my throat. I'm hopeless. Pathetic.

'Jasper!'

Driven by the sound of his owner's voice, Jasper prepares for one last push. In an instant I'm on my stomach again, leaning towards him. *Good boy! Clever dog.*

With a colossal effort, Jasper launches himself out of the water, at least halfway up the bank. I wrap my fingers around his collar, then I almost scream as my body lurches towards the water. For a few, slow-motion seconds, I'm dragged through the sludge, until my foot hooks on a rock. My shoulder jars and pain rips through my ankle, but we stop. I clench my teeth and heave. Jasper is wriggling and scrabbling. My grip loosens. No! I try to lock my fingers, but they're trembling too much. I'm going to lose him! I can't hold on!

Somehow, Jasper manages to propel himself up, knocking me backwards. The full weight of a sodden dog slams into my chest and forces the air from my lungs. I'm lying in the mud

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with a smelly, bedraggled dog on top of me. And I'm smiling, sucking in air, and crying at the same time.

Jasper rolls off me and shakes himself, peppering me with drops of dirty water. Then he flumps to the ground, panting. He looks at me and his tail twitches: a brave attempt at a wag. I stroke his ear and he nuzzles my palm, then licks my hand.

'Jasper!' The man staggers into the clearing, his voice husky. I lower my head and let my hair flop around my face.

'God, Jasper!' He kneels on the grass, running his hands over Jasper's damp fur. 'Are you OK?'

I'm not sure if he's talking to me or the dog. To be fair, neither of us is going to answer.

'What happened?'

I instruct my head to lift. Maybe I can smile at him? But my body is locked. I glimpse the man through my hair.

'Did he get stuck?'

I say nothing.

'I'm not going to hurt you.'

His tone is gentle, but it won't tempt my voice out.

'There's no need to be afraid.'

He doesn't seem surprised that I won't speak. It's almost like he understands. But that's stupid. Why would he?

'Can you tell me what happened?'

No.

'Didn't you hear me calling?'

Most people would be annoyed, but he just sounds curious.

'Are you all right?'

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I want to answer him. He seems like a nice man. Yes, I think, coaxing the word as if it's a weak flame. But it fizzles out, leaving a sour, smoky taste on my tongue. Defeated, I nod.

The man sighs, but isn't ready to give up yet. 'Do you want me to call someone for you?'

I shake my head.

There's a light touch on my arm. I tense, but don't move away.

'I've got some towels in the back of my car. If you want to come with me, you could clean up a bit.'

Silence. I shake my head. *No.*

Thank you, I add.

'OK . . . I don't feel right about leaving you here, but I've got to get Jasper home.'

I peek out from under my hair. Jasper is shivering.

'It looks like you tried to help him. Thanks.'

I want to reply. I want to thank him for not trying to force me to speak, for not asking more questions, but he's already disappeared into the woods.

He must think I'm an idiot. The word ricochets around my mind. Idiot, idiot, idiot.

CHAPTER TWO

Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three ... I'm standing by the door with my hand on the handle. The clock in the hallway ticks through the seconds ... twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Mum's heels clack down the stairs behind me. I get a waft of coconut conditioner. I don't need to turn to know the expression on her face is half bemused, half exasperated.

Thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six. When the clock reaches seven minutes and forty-eight seconds past eight, I haul down the handle and hurry out.

'Bye, Megan!' Mum calls after me.

I imagine saying goodbye, picture how Mum's brows would shoot up, how she'd smile and hug me, her eyes shiny with tears.

I lick my lips, open my mouth.

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No!

My teeth snap shut. I wave instead. Mum waves back, then shivers and slams the door. The sun is shining, but it's spring and there's still a bite in the air. A beer can is picked up by the breeze and clatters across the street, stopping beside a pork scratchings packet that's been floating around for days.

I take quick steps, head down, hoping I won't see any of our neighbours. I've lived all of my fifteen years in Scraters' Close, and it is, without doubt, the biggest dump in the whole of the New Forest.

I don't want to be at the bus stop until twenty-one minutes past eight, so I dawdle a little in the village centre. There's not a lot going on in Brookby: one café, a couple of pubs, a Post Office, a tiny convenience store and a load of tacky tourist shops, full of spiritual stuff like crystals, incense, dragon models and wizard puppets.

There's a huddle of kids near the war memorial, most of them wearing identically hideous burgundy uniforms with the Barcham Green logo on. I glance up the road. No bus. Damn! I plod towards them, my stomach writhing.

It's the first day back after Easter and excitement crackles through the air as Lindsay and Grace gossip about Lindsay's ex, Josh takes the piss out of Callum's 'gay' trainers, and Sadie waves a flashy pink mobile around. 'My stepdad bought it for me,' she says, with a flick of her corn-coloured hair.

Something's going on. They're showing off more than usual. Everyone stands in a loose circle, jabbering and squawking like

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seagulls fighting over a chip. It can only mean one thing: a new person. I peer through the bodies and catch tantalising glimpses of black, corkscrew curls, a pair of peacock earrings, and skin the colour of frappuccino.

‘I’m so jealous of your tan!’

‘How come you’re starting just before the exams?’

‘Whose form are you going to be in? Do you want to sit next to me on the bus?’

If – by some miracle – Sadie isn’t the one who gets her claws into the new girl, I try to figure out who she’ll end up with. There’s the fit-but-thick group, the boringly-average-in-every-way crowd, or – as a last resort – the weird-but-smart clique.

I don’t slot into any of those. So I hover on the outskirts of the circle – a lone sparrow. At least they’re distracted. At least they haven’t noticed me yet.

The bus grumbles up beside the pavement. Sadie gets priority boarding. Everyone knows that, so we all hang back. Her Twiglet legs jerk beneath a tight skirt as she strides forward, a triumphant grin on her face, arm linked with the new girl. Sadie’s new BFF has the honour of getting on first. I glance up and see two large, attractive eyes the shade of hazelnuts before she hurries up the steps.

Sadie puts her hand on the rail. Wow. She’s actually going to leave me alone today! My muscles unclench, as if I’ve sunk into a hot bath. But I’m wrong. Of course I’m wrong. Sadie pauses – not caring that everyone is waiting for her – and looks over her shoulder at me. Her lips, slick with deep, red gloss, form one word: ‘Freak.’ She runs her tongue over her teeth, savouring it.

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Lindsay gives me a look, daring me to fight back. I glare at the ground. I can think of a thousand things I'd like to say to Sadie, but all I do is blush and move to the back of the queue, wondering what happened to the girl I used to be friends with.

I know what Hana would've said: 'I'll tell you what's freaky – how Sadie's eyebrows are dark brown but she still claims to be a natural blonde.' I nod my head forward to hide my smile.

Sadie gets on the bus. As she struts to the back – the business class section – she looks down her nose at the plebs in the economy seats. She hates that she's not old enough to get a first-class seat on the last row, which is only for sixth-formers.

Lindsay follows, swinging her curved hips down the aisle, fingers twisting through her wispy brown hair. Half the boys on the bus turn to watch her go. She's wearing a white shirt with a lacy red bra beneath. Subtle.

Grace glides behind them, pale and willowy. She used to hate that skinny body, but now I think she loves being one of the thinnest girls in our year.

As soon as Sadie and her mates have got on, everyone surges forward. I wait at the back, eyes down, watching the scuffle of shoes. Callum's 'gay' trainers skirt to the front of the queue. Bad move. Someone snarls, 'Get to the back, queer-boy,' and gives him a shove. Callum stumbles, almost falls, but just about rights himself. He joins me at the back, calling them 'tossers' under his breath.

Poor Callum. I want to do something to show I understand,

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but what? I reach back and squeeze his arm. A few seconds later, he whispers quietly, so only the two of us can hear, 'Thanks, Megan.'

I glance up at the bus. The new girl is staring out of the window, right at us. My eyes race back to the ground. I remind myself to exhale. I seem to have forgotten how this whole breathing thing works!

I'm the last to board the bus. Inside, the air is still and fusty: a nauseating concoction of cheesy feet, Red Bull and body odour. I feel like getting off again, until I see Luke smiling at me. He's in our usual seat near the front. He's been growing his sandy hair out and it falls around his ears, scruffy and tousled. I slip into the seat next to him, wishing I could return the smile.

'Hi, Megan. How's it going?' Luke asks.

I don't look up but manage a nod.

Luke starts to chat as if we're having a normal conversation. He's describing the orienteering he did last week. 'We were the other side of Lyndhurst. It's really nice out there.'

No it's not. It's dangerous.

I don't go to that side of the New Forest any more. Luke should know that, after what happened.

What happened because of you.

I stiffen. Luke carries on, oblivious. 'Can't believe it'll all be over after this term.'

I swallow heavily. Neither can I. I don't even want to think about that now.

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Luke nudges me and grins. 'You think I should try for a seat on the back row in September?'

I shake my head. Luke should be up there in business class. He's clever, sporty, good-looking, but every day he sits here with me in the gum-spattered loser-seats. I wouldn't mind if he left. I know I'm not the best company. But we've been friends for a long time. We have this – I don't know – kind of bond, because of the things we know about each other. Things that will always stay just between us.

There's the rustle of a crisp packet behind me. It's Simon, Luke's brother. 'Hi, Megan.' He leans further over the seat and gusts of cheese and onion breath billow into my face. 'Did you see that programme? About the army?'

I look down and shake my head, but he starts to gush about it anyway. Simon speaks in short bursts, like machine gun fire: bom-bom-bom-bom. 'It was awesome! They had this one bloke, lost half his face. IED explosion.'

Luke has turned away to look out of the window, a wry smile on his lips. Simon prattles on, glad to talk to someone who won't tell him to shut up. He's halfway through a monologue about facial disfigurements when a ball of paper soars past his ear and lands in Luke's lap. It unfurls a little and we catch a glimpse of handwriting. Skin grafts and missing limbs forgotten, Simon cranes his head to try to see what it says.

Luke flicks it to the floor without opening it, his jaw tight with anger. Simon stares for a moment, then sits back to continue his crisp crunching. Luke and I settle into silence, but we both keep looking at that ball of paper.

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In the end, I sigh and lean forward to get it.

Luke grabs my hand. 'Don't.'

But I can't just leave it. I shake him off and pick it up, opening it discreetly on my lap: *What noise does a mute girl make when you ...*

I screw the paper into a ball as if I could crush the words, but not before Luke has seen. He swears, then turns to glare at the road. The back of his neck is red.

I fumble in my bag and tear a corner off my homework planner. *Ignore them*, I scribble. The corners of Luke's mouth twist into a sad smile.

I wish I had the guts to turn back and glare at the morons who wrote it. Is it so unbelievable that Luke and I are just friends? I don't fancy him. And he definitely doesn't fancy me. When Hana was still around, he only had eyes for her.

The bus continues out of Brookby, and within moments we're surrounded by open, expansive heathland. It's smattered with splashes of vivid yellow gorse against the green bracken.

A herd of wild ponies zigzags across the heath. Their manes whip through the wind and their hooves carve out clods of earth that fly up behind them. A couple of them make a sudden swerve on to the road. Our driver stamps on the brake and we all jerk forward. Simon thumps into the back of my seat and a girl behind us lets out a little shriek.

There's a pony right next to the window. Its rust-coloured coat is flecked with sweat and I can see every beautiful curve of its muscles. The herd moves on, away from the road. They're

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so erratic, exhilarating. I don't tear my gaze away until they've cantered and frolicked into the distance.

There's a new English teacher at school: Mrs Austin. Her head wobbles on top of a long neck like a nodding Churchill dog. A secret smile sneaks across my face as I imagine her saying, 'Oh, yes' in a deep Leeds accent.

Mrs Austin asks, 'What makes Caliban's speech so compelling in this scene?'

No one responds. Undaunted by the steely silence, Austin's eyes roam the room. They rest on me. Heat rises from my toes and devours my neck, ears, face.

Please don't ask me.

But she asks my name, then glances at the register.

Just leave me alone.

I shake my head. I tilt it forward so my hair falls in two curtains around my face. I have an answer, but the words are locked deep within me and I can't summon them to the surface. My classmates' stares bore tiny holes into me. I clench my hands.

Finally, someone breaks the agonising silence. 'She doesn't speak, Miss.' Sadie's voice is saturated with smugness.

There's an awkward pause. Someone must've told her about me, surely? Mrs Austin nods, gives an answer herself and moves on quickly.

As we file out of the classroom, Sadie flounces up with Lindsay and Grace at her heels, practically salivating on her legs. Sadie makes a big deal of saying, 'You're welcome.' Grace titters obligingly.

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My eyes flee to the ground and my arms wrap around my waist, but inside I'm seething. *You cow. I still have a voice, even if I can't use it. One day, when I can speak again, I'll tell you exactly what I think of you.*

Sadie sticks her nose in the air and leaves.

I sigh. *One day, when I can speak again ...* Yeah, like that's going to happen. Like I'd risk revealing the truth. No. I'll stay quiet. After all, there's no one better than a mute to keep a secret.

CHAPTER THREE

When the bus chucks us out in Brookby after school, there are a few sightseers still milling around, clutching bags of sticky fudge. A pony and trap rattles along the road, carrying a couple of Asian tourists who huddle together against the cold, smiles frozen to their faces.

As I pass the café, I peer through the steamy windows to see if Mum's still there. She's wiping down a table with brisk, impatient swipes. I bet she's craving a cigarette – she has that slightly ratty look on her face.

I can't get used to seeing Mum with her hair tied back. She hates it, but her boss makes her. 'Man's a health and safety Nazi,' she says. 'Should've seen his face when he found a fake nail in the egg mayonnaise. Had the nerve to accuse me! I mean, it was Electric Cherry, for God's sake, Megan. Who does he think I am?'

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Mum brushes a few loose strands of hair from her face. Her roots are starting to show. They're dark blonde, in contrast to the yellowy colour she dyes it. I must get my brown, wavy mop from Dad, although I've never seen a photo of him.

Mum straightens, spots me and waves. I wave back, then turn away and carry on home.

A row of trees lines the main road. I look up, listening for birdcalls and chirps, the rustle and whisper of wind darting through leaves. The branches form a canopy above me, like parents holding umbrellas over their children. The trees have been here all my life, as ancient and sturdy as Grandpa, though they have survived him by three years.

Mr Wexford dodders along the pavement towards me, shuffling and sniffing like a hedgehog. Back stooped, flat cap perched on his head, a walking stick in his trembling hand, he's the picture of a frail, kindly old man. But I know better.

Mr Wexford – like many locals – doesn't approve of Scraters Close. Brookby is full of thatched cottages and converted barns, gardens that brim with roses, lavender, honeysuckle. Scraters is two long terraces of scruffy houses with rubbish-tip gardens, graffitied garages, and several obnoxious residents.

As I pass him, Mr Wexford's moustache twitches. It's tinged pink where he's spilled his medicine. It would be sweet if he weren't such a horrible old git. 'Bloody scallywags,' he spits.

I try to muster a scathing retort.

Don't be stupid.

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I bite back a gasp. As he passes, Mr Wexford glowers at me. Then, with a whiff of TCP, he's gone.

I stomp down Scrater's, glaring at the dirt-coloured garages and the burnt-out husk of a car outside Number 5. Why the hell don't they move it? Or mow their lawn, for that matter?

Mr Wexford is right. Scrater's clings to the edge of Brookby like a slug on an orchid. A lot of villagers wish that the whole street could be scooped up and dumped in some grotty city. Then Brookby would actually be in with a chance of winning that stupid 'Village of the Year' award they're all so obsessed with.

Do they think we chose to live here? Did they imagine that people looked around loads of houses, weighed up their options and said, 'Yes, I'll take the one with the back door that's been kicked in and the neighbours who chuck cigarette stubs over the fence, just next to the phone box that's been smashed to pieces'? Idiots.

As soon as I get home, I prise off my shoes and peel the socks from my feet. I set the shoes in their correct place on the floor, aligning them at a right angle to the scuff mark on the wall.

I head to the kitchen in search of food, but the fridge offers nothing more than a sour, gone-off-milk smell and a couple of shrivelled carrots, and the only thing in the cupboards is a packet of dried cheese sauce that's three months out of date.

Last night's washing-up festers in the sink, the plates encrusted with dried tomato sauce. *Double rank*, Hana would say. She never made me feel embarrassed, though. She'd just laugh, grab a sponge, and help me to clean up.

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I can't cope with this. I have to sort it out now. I let the water run until it's steaming, then squirt a load of washing-up liquid in the bowl. I reach for the rubber gloves, then pause, a gentle smile on my face. Gran taught me to always wear rubber gloves. She said you could tell a lot about someone from their hands. Hers were wrinkled and gnarled with arthritis, but they were so, so soft. She'd taken care of them all her life. I loved the way her skin folded around her wedding ring, as if it had become a natural part of her body.

I practically grew up at Gran and Grandpa's. They looked after me while Mum was at work. They did everything they could to fill the gap left by Dad, who buggered off three months after Mum found out she was pregnant. They didn't speak to him after that. They were ashamed to call him their son.

I close my eyes. I can almost smell the sweet scent of Grandpa's baking brownies. In an instant, I'm back in their house, sitting at the kitchen table. Grandpa's wearing a pink, floral apron. I know he's done it just to make me laugh. It never fails.

'Here you go, chicken,' he says, setting a hot tray down in front of me and ruffling my hair. 'Don't burn yourself.'

I grab a spoon, poking it through the crust to the wonderfully gooey bit beneath.

I blink and I'm back in our own miserable kitchen, staring at the pile of dirty dishes. I leave them to soak. I align all the mugs in the cupboard so the handles face right, then I tidy up the sprawling mess of Mum's bills and letters. I sit on the sofa and run my fingers through the tassel on the cushion, then I trace the familiar whirls and flounces of the pattern on the fabric.

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I need to get out.

I rush upstairs to change. Then I open my top drawer and pull out Grandpa's camera. It's in a special, velvet-lined case. A Canon EOS 5 with a 100–300mm zoom lens. It's one of the old ones you put film in. Grandpa didn't upgrade to digital. He said his favourite part of photography was the suspense, the uncertainty, as he waited for his 'snaps' to be developed.

I leap down the stairs and get my old bike from the utility room. Outside, I pedal furiously until I reach the cattle grid at the top of the street, where I gently bump over the ridges. On the other side, I charge down the main road, my feet whizzing as I swerve past a couple of donkeys.

I see Mum before she sees me. She clicks down the pavement in a pair of ruby heels, an unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth, which gleams with coral lipstick. When she looks up, she whips the cigarette out and tries to hide it behind her back.

I coast to a stop next to her. Mum's hair looks limp, and her make-up is just a thin covering for the tiredness around her eyes. I pretend not to notice her guilty expression.

'Hello, you.' She gives me a weary sigh. I wonder if I should change my plans and go home with her. She looks knackered. 'You off out again?'

I shrug and point in the direction of home, as if to say: 'I don't have to.'

She doesn't get it, though. 'You don't know if you're going out? You might be going that way?'

I shrug again.

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Mum rustles a carrier bag. 'I've got some bits here. I don't think we have much else in.' She frowns, as if she's disappointed. It'll be leftovers from the café: hard baguettes stuffed with sweaty cheese and wilting salad, or a couple of stale slices of lemon cake. I want to tell her it's all right, I don't care that it's not proper food, but we both know that Grandpa would disapprove.

'Well, I'll see you at home then.'

One of Mum's hands is still behind her back. I point at it and raise my brows.

'What?' she says, widening her eyes in fake innocence.

I make a grab for her arm, just as she's about to flick the cigarette into some bushes behind her. She laughs and tries to twist away from me. 'OK, OK! You caught me.'

She waves the cigarette in my face. I giggle and try to snatch it from her, but she's too fast. 'Just one, Megan,' she pleads. 'I need one today. Some silly tart thought she saw mould on one of the sandwiches. I tried to tell her it was just a bit of flour, but she went off on one. Made a right scene.'

I smile, then push off from the pavement.

'Be back before dark!' she yells as I fly downhill.

I stop at the village green, where a small herd of cows has gathered. There's a ripple of twitching tails and wagging ears as they try to dislodge flies. I take out Grandpa's camera and frame a shot of a frisky new calf with its mother, a grand beech tree sweeping into the sky above them.

Soon I'm pedalling along a road that cuts across the heath. I feel like I've barely been able to breathe until now. I gulp in

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lungfuls of air. I'm moving so fast the wind whips tears from my eyes and nips at my knuckles.

I leave my bike in a car park off the main road, then set off down a trail. As I walk, I reach out to touch everything. I want to feel it all: the bristle of a gorse bush, the gentle tickle of leafy bracken, the scratch of tree bark. My limbs loosen and lengthen, my shoulders drop, and my heart rate slows.

Twenty minutes later, I reach a small patch of woodland. A stream darts between the trees, filling the forest with its gentle laughter, and a squirrel spirals down a tree trunk like it's a helter-skelter. I take a photo of the waning sun shooting spears of light through the leaves.

I settle on a bridge, place the camera down and swing my feet over the edge. I reach into my pocket and draw out a notebook and a pen. After sucking on the lid for a few seconds, I begin to write.