

## SUNDAY 3 MAY

*24 °C, cloudy, 92% humidity, 2.7 mm rain,  
wind 14 km/h S, 1010.7 hPa barometric pressure*

It's raining.

It's always raining because we live in Tully, the wettest town in Australia. We get more than 4000 millimetres of rain each year – that's the height of an African elephant. There's even a giant gumboot in the middle of town to celebrate how much it rains.

I like rain.

My eldest sister, Summer, says I'm a nerd, but when I grow up I'm going to be a climate scientist or a storm chaser or a meteorologist announcing the weather on the TV news. I've even built my own weather station. It has a psychrometer (to measure humidity), a rain gauge (to measure how much it rains), a barometer

(to measure atmospheric pressure – super important for knowing when a storm is coming), a wind vane (to measure which direction the wind is coming from) and an anemometer (to know how fast the wind is blowing). Dad found the instructions online and even Summer admits it's cool – and she's fifteen and thinks everything sucks.

I hold my hand out now to catch raindrops in my palm. 'Guess how much it's rained today?' I ask Teddy.

Teddy Gassel is shin-deep in the creek looking for frogs while I sit on a rock halfway up the embankment so my bum doesn't get soaked. He points at his brown hair, flattened into wet clumps from the rain. 'Heaps,' he says, and I snort.

It rains 'heaps' because of the mountains. Tully's squished between two: Mount Tyson and Mount Mackay. The clouds float in from the Coral Sea and get trapped between them. So, with nowhere to go, they dump all their rain on us.

'Did that leaf move?' Teddy points at a big green frond trapped in the reeds.

'Nah.'

He sighs in disappointment.

Teddy likes frogs. The mountain mist frog is his favourite because the tadpole has a super big mouth, which means it can bite onto the rocks and avoid being swept downstream when the water gets wild.

No one's seen one since 1990, so *technically* they're considered extinct. But Teddy reckons there was a lizard that was extinct for 500 years before someone spotted one on an island in 2007. So we keep looking for his favourite frog. Just in case.

The water sloshes as Teddy makes his way back to the embankment. Bulgun Creek snakes through town, wriggling south until it hits the Tully River. There are crocodiles in the river but none (I hope) in the creek. No matter how hard we look, there's never any mountain mist frogs either.

'Next time,' I say like, *Cheer up*.

We clomp through the scrub and out onto Wildsoet Street, checking for leeches before we take off down the road with Mad Dog Irene's farm on our right and the high school sports field on our left. My eyes are drawn straight ahead to a yellow hatchback parked skew-whiff across the nature strip, blocking the whole path. Rude. The car's sides are splattered with mud and there's a sticker of an alien on the bumper.

Aliens. Ugh.

'Whose car is that, you reckon?' Teddy peeks through the car's side window as we make our way around it. The back seat is littered with boxes, suitcases and shopping bags.

'Probably someone visiting the high school,' I say.

‘On a Sunday? But—’ There’s a sudden swooshing noise nearby. Teddy ducks behind the car, tugging me down with him. ‘It came from in there.’ He points at Mad Dog Irene’s sugar cane, row after row of looming stalks with scruffy leaves. ‘Look! The cane’s *moving!*’

He’s right. A patch close to the road is swirling. Like someone – or *something* – is stomping around in there, making the sugar cane dance. *Swish-swoosh, swish-swoosh.*

‘What if it’s a murderer?’ Teddy whispers. ‘Or a cassowary?’

‘Or a willy-willy,’ I say, perking up.

A willy-willy is a mini tornado. When the ground gets hot, it makes the wind swirl upwards fast. I’ve never seen one.

I *really* want to see one. ‘Let’s go.’

‘In there? No way!’

‘Yes way.’

Teddy chases me as I march towards the sugar cane. ‘But Irene will set her dog on us,’ he says. ‘It’s private property.’

I’m not scared of Mad Dog Irene or her dog. If there’s a willy-willy, I want to see it. I’ll be interviewed on the news. I’ll be a proper weather scientist.

‘We’ll only take a peek,’ I say. ‘Irene won’t know.’ I part the stalks and step inside.

The sugar cane closes around us, the leaves tickling every inch of me they can reach. I push through the tangle, whipping them out of my face like flies as I stumble over the soggy, lumpy earth until suddenly I can't tell which way is which.

*Oh.*

*Maybe this wasn't such a good idea ...*

'Dell?' Teddy bumps into my back. *Oof.* 'Are we lost?'

'Nah.' Maybe. Which way was the dancing sugar cane? Straight ahead? To the left a bit? I take another step in. And another. I listen for more rustling. There! 'This way, Teddy! Come on!'

'We'll never get out of here,' Teddy whines. But he clutches my damp t-shirt and follows anyway.

'We'll be fine.' I take one more giant step then—

Oh no.

We've stumbled into a large circle where all the sugar cane has been squashed flat. It's basically a giant grass mat as big as my house, the flattened stalks spiralling towards the centre. Clockwise.

Oh *no.*

'Woah.' Teddy's jaw drops. 'Is this—?'

'We have to go.' My brain fills with centipedes. Creepy-crawly, ticklish centipedes. Because I've seen this before. In videos, photos, sketches. 'Come on, Teddy. *Hurry.*' I grab his arm and pull.

He doesn't budge. 'But it's a crop circle.'

Ugh.

Yes, it's a crop circle.

A big one.

Which is a problem. Because *some* people reckon crop circles are either secret alien codes or what's left behind after aliens park their spaceships. In Tully, they've found heaps – like *hundreds* – of crop circles, and plenty of people reckon they've seen strange lights and flying saucers, too.

No one built a giant UFO in the middle of town, but the truth is Tully is also pretty famous for aliens. Rain and aliens.

'Forget about it,' I tell Teddy, rushing for the edge of the circle. But I halt as the sugar cane starts to dance again – *swish-swoosh, swish-swoosh* – and a figure stomps out of the cane towards us.

'Aliens!' hisses Teddy.

But the figure that steps into the circle isn't an alien.

It's a woman with long brown hair and a tattoo rope of moon phases around her bicep. Her skin is freckled and pink from too much sun.

'I can't see any more,' she calls over her shoulder. 'Just this one.'

The air is knocked out of me as she turns back around and I meet her eyes, the same honey-brown as mine.

Mum.

‘Dell.’ She breaks into a smile, as bright as Venus in the night sky. My heart thunders. ‘Long time no see.’