

THE PLATYPUS

Mum had insisted Cam and Sophie wear bright-yellow emergency ponchos, even though they were the most incredibly awful things ever invented, and it wasn't even an actual emergency. Liv had a proper rain jacket and Aunty Sarah's umbrella. But Jack said raincoats were for babies.

‘I don’t get cold,’ he boasted, already damp in his hoodie and jeans.

Cam stared up at Jack in awe. He was basically like Superman.

Jack protected his eyes with his hands and squinted at Cam’s poncho. ‘My eyes! You’re burning my eyes!’

‘Very funny,’ said Liv. And it sort of was.

‘You’ll scare the platypus,’ said Jack. ‘They’ll all swim away.’ Which wasn’t funny at all. What if it did scare the platypus? Cam couldn’t stand it.

‘At least she’ll be dry,’ said Liv, zipping her own jacket against the ever-falling rain.

But Jack was right. What was wrong with getting wet? And why did Cam have to wear an embarrassing poncho? She’d been waiting since forever for this moment. They’d travelled halfway across Australia, to the longest stretch of sub-tropical rainforest on the continent, to the world’s best spot for seeing wild platypus. And now, just minutes away from Cam’s dream coming true, here she was, dressed in a poncho that was basically a massive flashing sign stamped all over with DANGER!!! BEWARE ALL PLATYPUS!!!

Uncle Pete waved the four of them goodbye from the back steps of the holiday house. ‘Take care of your cousins,’ he called to Liv and Jack. ‘And

take your time, you can’t rush these things!’ He turned back inside. ‘Now, who’s for a little glass of something?’

Outside was like walking through clouds. Mist curled down from the trees, curled up from the ground, hung in the air as if gravity no longer applied. Everything smelled wet and earthy and Cam felt so alive after that stuffy house and pukey car and stinky aeroplane. Who cared that it hadn’t stopped raining since they’d arrived?

They sloshed down the driveway and out to the road.

‘First time to see a platypus?’ asked Liv, taking Sophie’s hand. Cam’s little sister nodded, jumping with excitement.

Sophie began cavorting like an otter along the flooded verge. Cam tried to walk maturely, like someone who wasn’t wearing a fluorescent yellow emergency poncho. But soon everyone was



splashing and laughing and Jack had grabbed the umbrella to use as a boat. Sprays of water shot out like starbursts. Why were adults so afraid of rain?

Then they reached the bridge.

On the internet, when Dad had shown them pictures of this spot, the river had shone like crystal. There had been rocks to climb and pools to explore and tiny platypus had swum ripples into the glassy surface.

Perhaps this was a different bridge? Or even a different river? Because when Cam looked down at the water, there wasn't a rockpool or ripple in sight.

The river was writhing and raging like a wild thing. Cream and caramel waves seemed to plough through the forest like bulldozers. Not a single inch of river was crystal. How could Liv and Jack have seen platypus here only yesterday? They must've been joking. Jack was always joking. But even Liv said she'd seen them. Maybe Liv was joking too. Because if any platypus put so much as a toe in

this river, they'd be swept away. They'd drown, Cam had no doubt about it. The water roiled like a hungry monster. What if the platypus had drowned already? Her heart twisted. She wanted to warn them. What about their little platypus babies?

'There,' said Liv, jabbing a finger over the railing of the bridge.

Cam stared hard into the surging wash, on tippy-toes for extra luck.

'Aw, it's gone,' said Liv.

'Where?' said Sophie. 'Where? I didn't seeee.'

'It'll come back,' said Liv. 'Shhh.'

But the platypus, if it had been a platypus, didn't come back.

'But I want to see the platypus,' Sophie cried. Cam knew Sophie was tired from all the travel. But she also knew Sophie loved being the baby. A quick whinge and some big, round eyes and Sophie could get anything she wanted. Anything, it seemed, except a platypus.

'How about an icecream?' suggested Jack.

'There's icecream at the visitor centre.'

'I want an icecream,' agreed Sophie, forgetting the platypus instantly.

'But ...' Cam looked desperately at Liv. She wasn't ready to go just yet. What about the platypus?

Too late. Jack was already walking with Sophie to the other side of the bridge, in the direction of icecream. 'You heard Dad,' he called to Liv. 'We have to look after our cousins.'

Cam peered into the rolling waves as she and Liv followed Jack and Sophie across the bridge. She wished for a platypus to appear with all her might. Nope. Not a thing.

'Don't worry,' said Liv. 'We'll look again on the way back.'

The path to the visitor's centre wound through a section of rainforest. Imagine that! A real rainforest! Cam breathed it all in, the smell of wet

wood and rotting plants, the shine of water-slicked leaves and ever-unfurling green. And so much rain. Cam lived in a world of water restrictions and hot, dry summers. She'd never seen this much water outside of the ocean, never seen this much green. Being in an actual rainforest was a dream come true, if they could only find a platypus.

The visitor centre sold icecream in tiny cardboard tubs with mini spoons. Sophie and Liv got M&Ms flavour and Cam chose caramel. Jack ordered a coffee.

'You're not allowed coffee,' said Liv.

Jack only shrugged.

On the way back across the bridge they stopped again, searching the swollen river as they spooned icecream into their mouths. Rain was still falling, but softly now, lacing Cam's face like an icy web. She stared and stared into the river, almost hypnotising herself, but she didn't see a single platypus, not even a ripple.

'There,' said Liv, pointing.

'Where?'

But it was gone. They looked for a few more minutes, the rain growing heavier again. 'We should head back,' Liv said.

Sophie's face crumpled. 'I want to see a platypus.' But the sky was closing in; the white of the mist seemed to sink slowly into the water.

Cam felt like crying too. They'd travelled all this way ... She wondered if maybe Jack was right, if the horrible ponchos had scared the platypus away. Tomorrow she'd leave hers behind.

And then suddenly, there it was.

A real-live platypus. Right there, in the river! Though how long it would live, Cam didn't know. Not long, she guessed, not with that thing around its neck.