



A CREEK STORY

The
Belly-Up Hug

WREN MARLOWE

PUDDLEBEND



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*For the prickly, who are also soft
somewhere.*





Bramble patted the grass twice. He swept one wide foreleg toward Tuck. The rope-sash shone on his chest in the late light. Tuck waddled closer. She wanted a squish.



Tuck waddled straight at him with both arms open. "Hug? Ow. Sorry. Hug?" she asked, already smiling. Bramble held still for her rush.

Her open paws closed the last grass before his chest.

Tuck held on as hard as she could. She had wanted this proper squish all afternoon. The mustard pom-pom went flat between them. "Best hug," she whispered into his fur. Bramble stood very still under the gum. Something sharp dug hard at his chest.





"Ow," said Bramble in a low rumble. His whole body lowered and widened on the bank. He gripped the rope-sash tight in one paw. His wide foreleg dropped. Tuck stepped back fast from his chest. "I did not mean to poke," she said. Her spines tipped inward toward a curl.



Tuck curled into a tight ball on the grass. One dark eye peeked between her spines. The mustard pom-pom sat squashed on top. "Sorry," she whispered to the dirt. She stayed small. The grass felt cool on her nose. The rope hung still above her.



Bramble swept the rope-sash into a wide circle on the bank under the gum. "Steady," he rumbled. "Stay where I can see you." He planted his haunches deep in the grass. Tuck watched with one eye from her ball. The circle sat open on the grass beside him. Her tight ball loosened at the edges.



Tuck uncurled on the grass with a quick shake. Both arms opened wide for him. "I will be very, very soft this time," she promised. She set her waddle toward Bramble's chest once more. Spines lifted on her back anyway. "Hug? Ow. Sorry. Hug?" she called. She rushed hard for the open grass inside it.



Tuck's spines jabbed Bramble's soft shoulder through the rope. "Ow," he rumbled, and the sash sagged slack around them both. Her open paws had already crossed the circle's edge. The gather that pulled her close now pushed her clean out. "Sorry," she squeaked as she went. Her whole body tipped toward the grass outside the rope.



Tuck rested in a tight ball
outside the rope. One eye
cracked open toward it.
Bramble stayed inside.





Tuck rolled onto her back in the grass outside the circle. Her belly turned up to the late light. She tucked her paws close. "What if the soft part goes first?" she asked the sky. The mustard pom-pom tipped toward Bramble's careful paw.



Bramble reached with one careful paw. He patted the mustard pom-pom once. Soft wool met his pad and bounced. Tuck held very still with her belly turned up. No spine met his fur this time. "There," he rumbled. The first touch landed gentle as a leaf.



Tuck leaned her soft belly against Bramble inside the rope. His paw stayed gentle on the pom-pom. "Hug? Ow. Sorry. Hug?" she whispered, softer now. No ow came. The rope settled in a loose circle around them both.

EVERYONE AT THE CREEK



Bramble

COMMON WOMBAT

The steady big-kid guardian



Cinder

COATIMUNDI

The nosy neighborhood explorer



Hush

TAWNY FROGMOUTH

The tall nervous big cousin who thinks nobody can see him



Nix

SUGAR GLIDER

The littlest rocket sibling



Skip

MUDSKIPPER

The tiny little brother who cannot wait his turn



Sora

SANDHILL CRANE

The tall watchful big-sister neighbor



Tock

FIDDLER CRAB

The bossy little drummer who wants everyone in the game



Tuck

SHORT-BEAKED ECHIDNA

The littlest cousin who is always a bit too close

ABOUT THE CREEK

Puddlebend is a slow bend in a warm creek where the water is shallow enough to stand in and the mud is soft enough to sit down in. Everyone who lives there is small. Everyone who lives there is working something out.

These stories are about the ordinary, difficult business of being a friend: waiting your turn, going back for what you dropped, letting someone hold you when you are all spikes.

WREN MARLOWE

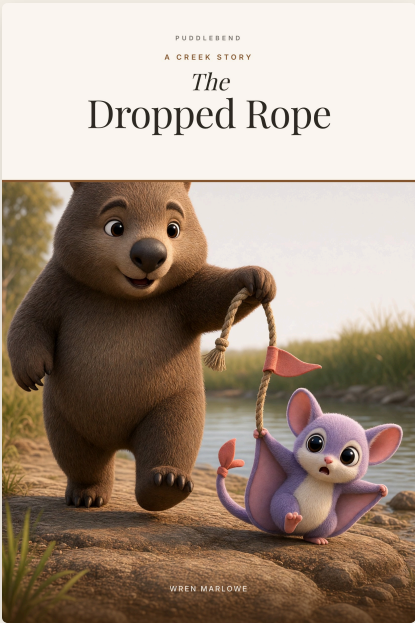
Wren Marlowe is the Puddlebend house name for stories made at the water's edge — quiet, funny books about small creatures working out how to be together.



ALSO IN THIS SERIES



The Missed Leaf



The Dropped Rope



The Clacking Lid



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