

PUDDLEBEND

A CREEK STORY

The Dropped Rope



WREN MARLOWE



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*For the ones who go back for what they
dropped.*





The far bank shone through the gum leaves. Bramble stopped at the mud. Nix leaned toward the three dark stones. "The grass looks taller over there," she said.



Bramble patted the first stone twice. His paw closed on the rope tassels at his hip. He said, "We check first. Then we go." "Three full checks. Nobody crosses till then."

Nix bounced in place on the soft mud. Her whole body squeezed small and tight like a spring. "One-two-THREE!" she whispered to the stones. The pennant shook hard beside her. She was not watching his check at all.





She sprang from the mud before the check was done. "One-two-THREE!" she cried. The full count carried her out over the middle water. Her grin stretched wide as the creek slid under her. The near bank fell away behind. No rope could catch her now.



Bramble's foreleg came around in one slow wide arc. He swept Nix back onto the soft mud under the gum. "We start again," he said. His paw never left the rope tassels. The pennant was still streaming when she landed.



Bramble stacked three pebbles into a low wall beside the rope end. He said, "We check first. Then we go." He patted the first stone twice more. Nix puddled flat on the mud. Her membranes drooped and her pennant hung still. "Two more checks," he rumbled. "Stay steady."



Nix's spine went tight on the mud. She did not wait for a full count this time. "One-TWO!" she burst out. She was already moving. Her hind legs left the bank before the words were done. The pennant fluttered hard behind her. She was in the air on a half-count spring and grinning.



Bramble planted his haunches across the near stone. He blocked the whole path from edge to edge. Nix hit his foreleg mid-arc and tumbled down. The three pebbles scattered across the mud. "Back," he said. His paw gripped the rope harder than before. "We still have one check left. Stay steady."



But Nix gave no count at all. She wound once and sprang. She glided the whole way over the open creek. She landed on the far stone alone. The water lay wide between her and the bank she had left.





Bramble looked across the water. The rope could not reach her. The words cost more now.





Bramble's paw opened around the tassels. Each braid slid across the pad of his foot. The third check never came. "I will come," he said low. He said it across the whole width of the water. The rope end dropped and stayed dropped.

The rope-sash slipped free of his shoulder. The tassels fell toward the mud beside the scattered pebbles. He said, "We check first. Then we go." He left the words on the bank with the rope. His free paw hung open and empty.





Bramble stepped onto the first dark stone. He had no rope in his paw. Across the water Nix held still on her stone. Her pennant hung quiet. She did not launch. She waited as he took the next step.



They sat shoulder to shoulder on the far bank.
The grass stood tall around them. Behind
them the rope lay thin and dark on the old
mud. Nix leaned in.

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 Belly-Up Hug



The Clacking Lid



The Landing Branch



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